

Chapter 3

Radicals

The words chalked on our classroom blackboard carried a disturbing message, one I'd never before read. Or heard – never even thought about. I knew who wrote the words but I didn't know what to do about it.

Just over an hour earlier I had awakened with a start, afraid I'd overslept. The old wind-up alarm clock beside my bed read ten minutes till six. Most days I'd roll over and nap ten more minutes. That morning I jumped up and dressed in the blue jeans and red checked shirt I'd laid out last night; tried without much success to comb my mop of red-brown hair. I'd finished my orange juice and a bowl of Wheaties when Momma and Daddy, still in their pajamas and all sleepy-eyed, came into the kitchen. "You're up early," Daddy said. "Special day?" Momma asked.

The blue sky and crisp air seemed right for election day at Kettle High School. I walked to school at a fast pace. The bright sun lit Kettle High's yellow brick walls and reflected off the building's large front windows. I passed through the columns of the main entrance and thought about how in a few hours, during homeroom period, we'd cast our votes for the nineteen and forty-five Homecoming Queen and her Court. In our class we had a hot contest between Betty Lou Sovine and Cricket Hobson for sophomore class Attendant. I served on the Homecoming Election Committee and had a special responsibility that morning to check the home rooms and make sure the ballots and ballot boxes had been distributed. I did my job. In the center of each teacher's desk sat a stack of ballots and a box wrapped in orange and black crepe paper. Each box had a white sign with red letters, "Homecoming Ballot Box," and the teacher's name.

When I had completed my check of all the home rooms I walked to Mr. Johnson's room for first period history class. I stopped in the hallway just outside the door. Inside Cricket Hobson stood alone, writing on the blackboard. Her height, nearly six feet, placed the top of Cricket's head near the upper edge of the blackboard. To Cricket's left the board still displayed the Mr. Johnson's list of historical events, part of a week-long lesson he called "West Virginia enters the twentieth century." We'd have to memorize his list for a test.

- 1898 Spanish American War: West Virginia raises two regiments of volunteer infantry
- 1901 Governor George W. Atkinson requests the Legislature to name a state flower
- 1904 Davis and Elkins College established at Elkins
- 1905 Morgantown incorporated
- 1909 White Sulphur Springs incorporated
- 1910 Weirton Steel Company begins operations

After Cricket finished writing on the board she walked to her desk, sat down and opened her notebook. Cricket's list went down a different road from Mr. Johnson's list, and told of things we'd not talked about in class – things I'd never heard anybody talk about.

Real History – The West Virginia Coal Mines Wars

- 1902 Mother Jones campaigns to unionize 7,000 miners in Kanawha Valley
- And men died in underground explosions and cave-ins –
- 1906 January 4 - 22 miners killed at Coaldale mine in Mercer County
- January 18 - 18 miners killed at Detroit mine in Kanawha County
- February 8 - 23 miners killed at Parral mine in Fayette County
- March 22 - 23 miners killed at Century mine in Barbour County
- 1907 January 29 - 84 miners killed at Stuart in Fayette County
- February 4 - 25 miners killed at Thomas mine in Tucker County
- December 6 - 362 miners killed at Monongah – worst mine disaster in US history
- 1909 January 12 - 67 miners killed at Switchback mine in McDowell County

I walked into the room and went to my desk. Shortly after I sat down other kids came in. Most days we had lots to talk about before class. But that day everybody stared at the list, though only I knew Cricket had written it. No one spoke. Cricket looked up from her books and gave the list a wide-eyed stare, like she had never seen it before.

Mr. Johnson, in the brown gabardine suit and brown necktie he wore on Tuesdays and Thursdays, walked into the room. He stopped about halfway from the door to his desk, pushed his thick glasses up the ridge of his nose, and joined us in staring at the new list. After a moment Mr. Johnson walked to the blackboard, picked up an eraser, and wiped the right half of the board clean. My gaze stayed riveted to the section of the board where Cricket's list had been, as if the words remained but had become temporarily invisible.

Mr. Johnson turned, faced the class and then, peering through what William White called his Coke-bottle-lens glasses, looked at each of us. His lips frowned downwards and his eyebrows arched upwards. At one point he looked me squarely in the eyes. One by one he did the same to everybody in the room. "I don't suppose whoever among you wrote that... that..." he paused, "that *list* on the board, will stand up." When he said the word "list" he hissed it, lissst. "Or will you?"

Cricket had no expression on her face. She sat there as cool as a cucumber, her eyes on Mr. Johnson. My insides churned. Should I raise my hand? In the movies James Cagney called anyone who squealed on his friends to the cops "a rat." I didn't want to be a rat. Still, I knew who wrote the list, and it bothered me.

I didn't want to look at Mr. Johnson. But if I didn't look at him, he might think I wrote the list. I eased my eyes back to Mr. Johnson. I first looked at the gold key chain

across his brown vest, and then inched my gaze up to his round face. When I got to his eyes my breath stopped for an instant. He had his eyes aimed directly at me. I tried to look like I just remembered something important, ducked my head and studied a page in my notebook. My cheeks heated up.

Mr. Johnson spoke sternly, his voice a deeper bass than usual, “I won’t have that radical...*lissst*...in this room. Don’t let it happen again.”

He studied some notes on his desk. After a minute he looked up, licked his lips, and gave us big smile so big I could see a thin line of brown stain along the tops of his upper teeth. “Now, we’ll get on with American history in the early twentieth century, and West Virginia.”

On the blackboard where Cricket’s list had been he wrote,

- 1912 Prohibition becomes effective
- The Beckley fire
- 1913 Thousands homeless in Huntington and Parkersburg due to Ohio River flooding in March

That morning we heard a lot about the Beckley fire. Mr. Johnson had grown up in Beckley and accepted his first teaching job there, the year the fire occurred. The fire took out both sides of Heber Street for quite a few blocks, including Mr. Johnson’s school. He told us he lost all of his teaching notes and lesson plans. Most of downtown Beckley had burned, along with many of homes. Mr. Johnson said people believed that radicals, organizers for the United Mine Workers, set the fire to burn down a building that housed the Mountain Coal Company.

I made a decision to keep quiet, at least for now, about Cricket’s writing the radical list. But my decision troubled me. After all, I saw her do it. And Mr. Johnson

asked, "Who did it?" I didn't want to be a rat, but I didn't like knowing the truth and not telling it.

After lunch hour I walked the long corridor to our homeroom with Beverly Shade. Although the milk-glass globes dangling from the corridor's ceiling were lit, the bright sun shining in the window at the end of the corridor made the hallway seem dark. The darkness got a boost from the dark green paint half-way up each corridor wall.

At the Kettle Fourth of July celebration the summer of forty-five I had found myself looking into Beverly's blue eyes when the two of us tried to get red raspberry juice stain out of my white shirt. Not long afterwards I invited her to go to a movie with me. We had continued to date, though not every weekend. This coming Friday night we'd go to the homecoming dance together. With the war just over, this year's homecoming would be special. Some of the Kettle boys who had returned from overseas service would be there.

Walking into homeroom, Beverly and I talked about the election. The orange and black ballot box sat on the teacher's desk between the door and the large windows on the far side of the room. My Momma had been elected Attendant to the Queen during her junior year at Kettle High School, nineteen and twenty-five. On our piano we had a picture of her and Daddy at the homecoming celebration. Momma wore a fluffy gown and Daddy a dark suit. Momma held Daddy's arm.

Beverly and I turned towards the sounds of somebody running lickety-split down the hall. William White Wallace ran to us, red-faced and out of breath.

“Freddy, Ralph Persinger just punched me on the shoulder and told me to vote for Cricket Hobson. He said if Betty Lou Sovine gets elected he’s going to whip my ass – that my name is first on his list.”

I shook my head. “William White, ever since the finalists were announced, Ralph Persinger has been telling everybody, including you and me, to vote for Cricket Hobson, and he’d whip our asses if we didn’t. You’re just on his list again for today.”

Beverly put her hand on my arm and said, “Freddy, what those boys are doing is wrong. I wish you could find a way to stop the whole thing.” She walked into home room.

I knew a way to stop it, all right.

I tried to get my thoughts around the possibility of pimple-faced Ralph Persinger beating up on all the boys in the sophomore class. Ralph had a stocky and strong body, but he ate too much candy and carried lots of fat. About then Cricket Hobson walked past us into homeroom. Her coarse straight black hair, cut short with bangs, seemed to form a block around her head. Cricket had long arms and legs. William White once said, “Freddy, remember Olive Oyl in the Popeye comic strip? I think Cricket looks like her.”

Shortly after Cricket had been born, her Momma, Orpha Ball Hobson, took one look at her little baby’s long arms and legs and big brown eyes, and said, “Honey, you look like a cricket.” Cricket is her given name.

The Hobsons lived on a small farm up on Cedar Creek. One side of their farm butted up against Ermil Goad’s big spread. Whenever Ermil Goad came to Gruber’s Store, always wearing his brown derby and blue-and-white-striped coveralls, he’d take a seat by the stove and folks would hear about his lingering bother with Cricket’s Daddy,

Pinetar Hobson. Ermil Goad would lean forward in his chair, push the old dusty derby back on his head, and say to anyone who would listen, "I told him, whether through design or neglect, Pinetar Hobson, your farm is a breeding ground for tobacco worms. A sinkhole full of green and yellow slinkys, that's what it is. And them worms are a direct threat to my cash crop."

One summer evening before school started, Daddy and I sat after supper in the glider on our front porch. That afternoon I had bought some eggs for Momma at the Gruber's. Ermil Goad had been there, sitting in a chair beside the pickle barrel and complaining about Pinetar Hobson. I asked Daddy about Mr. Goad's problem. Daddy stretched out his long legs, ran his hands through his reddish-brown hair, and told me that as far as he knew, during the growing season everybody who raised tobacco had problems with tobacco worms. "Maybe Ermil Goad just wanted to blame somebody," he added. Daddy said as far as he knew, Pinetar minded his own business and took care of his tobacco crop and vegetable garden.

Then Daddy squinted his eyes and continued, "Freddy, in the early winter of nineteen and twenty one, after some trouble in the coalfields down around Logan as well as in Mingo and McDowell counties, some miners and their families, including Pinetar Hobson, moved up here and settled on Cedar Creek. Pinetar was a young man then. As I recall his first wife had died before he moved here. He worked on farms around town, and then bought his small farm. Some of the kids from those families were in classes with your Momma and me at Kettle High.

“The miners who moved up here had been through a difficult time. They’d been trying to organize the union in the coalfields and fighting had broken out, though it wasn’t the first time fighting had occurred.”

I remembered the times Momma, Daddy, and I drove the curvy roads through the steep mountains of Logan County to visit relatives. Sometimes I got carsick from all the sharp turns. “What were they fighting about?” I asked.

“The mines were unsafe places, Freddy. Still are, though not as bad as back then. Down in the mines there was bad air and dangerous work. Sometimes there were explosions from methane gas. At other times, roof-falls and cave-ins. Many men died. Lots of men were injured.”

“Like Albert Newcomb losing his leg in a mine?” I asked.

“That’s right, though I think Albert got run over by a coal car. And to make matters worse, miners were paid low wages and then had to shell out money to buy their own tools. Sometimes they even had to buy the dynamite to blast out the rock and coal underground.”

“They paid for it out of their own pockets, I mean their own money?”

“Yep. And the coal companies built towns with small homes they rented to the miners who worked for them. And they built company stores to sell the miners groceries, clothes and tools. Most of the miners’ wages went right back to the company.

“How’d the miners ever get a little ahead?” I asked.

“Lots of them, maybe most, never did. In eighteen and ninety-three there was a miners’ uprising over wages and safety. A company of National Guard troops ordered to

deal with the miners made their camp right here in Kettle and traveled by rail down to the coalfields.

“Where’d they camp?”

“In the flat land just on the other side of Sour Apple River, on the road to Broke Hill.”

I made a mental note to tell William White about the camp. We might find bullets or camp items the soldiers left behind.

“Things quieted down until nineteen and twenty-one. That year miners and coal operators fought skirmishes along the Tug River, between West Virginia and Kentucky. Then the fighting spread. Many of those miners had served in World War One, and were no strangers to armed combat. A year earlier, nineteen and twenty, the coal operators had called in outside help from the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency. The agency’s men assembled in Matewan, a town where the miners were well organized.

“We went to Matewan one time, didn’t we?”

“Yes, we drove right past the place where the Baldwin-Felts men tried to serve what they said were arrest warrants on some of the miners. The local police chief, Sid Hatfield, took the side of the miners and stood up to the operators and Baldwin-Felts men. He said the warrants weren’t legal and they couldn’t arrest anybody. Nobody knew who fired the first shot, but there was a shootout. Didn’t last three minutes, but ten men were killed, including the Mayor of Matewan, Cable Testerman.

“Ten, shot dead?”

“That’s right. And a couple of months later, on the front steps of the McDowell County Court House, a Baldwin-Felts man shot Sid Hatfield dead. He claimed self-

defense, but eye-witnesses said otherwise. That triggered serious fighting and it came to a head at the Battle of Blair Mountain.

“I know where Blair Mountain is, but I never heard about a battle there,” I said. The highway from Boone County to Logan, the county seat of Logan County, passed down a valley overlooked by Blair Mountain.

Daddy’s face reddened a little and his face grew tense as he described how Logan County Sheriff Don Chafin had hired and deputized large numbers of men. Local men out of work, college students home for the summer, even teachers. Hundreds of men came in by train, some from other parts of the country. In late August of nineteen and twenty-one Chafin commanded an army of deputies, Baldwin-Felts detectives, and the Volunteer State Police of West Virginia, along with much of the West Virginia National Guard. The U.S. Army’s 10th Infantry Division had arrived too, though not authorized to fight.

Daddy said that Chafin’s army, thousands of men armed to the teeth, defended the Logan County side of Blair Mountain. Thousands of miners had organized themselves in Boone County and set about to march to Logan and take on Sheriff Chafin and his men. As they approached Chafin’s army, the miners spread out through the thick woods and climbed the steep Boone County side of Blair Mountain. Both sides opened fire and fought on the mountain.

Daddy’s long face became even longer, and drawn. He told me that the U.S. Army had brought airplanes with them – that the Battle of Blair Mountain had been the only time in American history when our government dropped bombs on U.S. citizens.

“The battle lasted three days. On the third day President Harding authorized the Army to enter the conflict. When the troops arrived the miners drifted back into the woods, then off the mountain. The mine owners’ victory made it possible for them to keep the United Mine Workers out of southern West Virginia, at least until after Franklin Roosevelt was elected president.”

“Was Pinetar one of the miners at Blair Mountain?” I asked.

“I think so. Most of the miners who moved to Cedar Creek were at Blair Mountain.”

Pinetar, short and thin, had coarse black hair that he slicked down and combed straight back. He had dark eyes and high cheekbones. Some folks around town said they thought he had Indian blood in him – Cherokee, Hartford Wilson claimed. One Saturday afternoon on Main Street, Pinetar walked past William White and me and we spoke to him. Folks customarily greeted each other when passing on the streets of Kettle. But Pinetar looked straight ahead and walked on. William White leaned towards me and said in a low Indian-like voice, “Still water run deep, ugh.”

Cricket, the youngest of three sisters, had been a member of our class since first grade. But even by the tenth grade I didn’t know her very well. Each day, year in, year out, Cricket rode the early bus to school, attended classes, and then rode the bus home. In class she rarely spoke unless a teacher called on her. Cricket liked to read and had done well in her studies, though on exams she hadn’t placed at the top of the class. If we had class projects Cricket joined a group of her friends from Lee’s Creek. William White called them “The Cedar Creek Gang.” The girls wore cotton print dresses made from the

large bags that feed and grain came in. At noon the little group ate together at a table on the far left side of the cafeteria and kept pretty much to themselves.

Miss Isabel B. Mounts, librarian at Kettle High School, taught the junior high girls' bible class at the Kettle Methodist Church Sunday School. One Sunday morning she said something about Cricket to her Sunday School class that Beverly Shade passed on to me as a direct quote from Miss Mounts. Beverly even tried to make her voice go into a high-pitched sing-song tone, like Miss Mounts, though she fell a little short of an exact copy. I helped her out by imagining Miss Mounts's round face, bobbed brown hair, black dress, and wire-rimmed glasses. "When I think of a good example of a young woman who leads a life of dignified simplicity, a young woman who is clean, moral, and in her proper place in the natural order of things, I think of Cricket Hobson. Her life is, perhaps, uneventful, but it is one in which a girl, indeed all girls, can take pride."

At four o'clock that Tuesday, election day, William White, Susie Mac – that is, Susan MacLendon – and I walked into the Kettle High School library. The library had nearly a thousand books placed on the light oak shelves that lined the room's walls. Oak tables, each seating six students, had been placed in rows of two the length of the large rectangular room. Miss Mounts positioned her desk near the front door, along with the index card files, wooden drawers crammed with cards bearing information on each of the library's books.

William White, Susie Mac and I had been appointed the ballot counters for the election. William White volunteered himself for anything that put him close to Susie Mac, and in this case he volunteered me too. Susie Mac had curly blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes. But most of all she had a well-endowed figure. William White said

he knew for a fact that she wore the largest bra of all the girls in the sophomore class. I wondered how he knew.

When we walked into the library, Miss Isabel B. Mounts sat behind her desk carefully wiping the lenses of her glasses with a tissue. Miss Mounts sometimes interrupted study halls in the library to remind kids who wore glasses to clean them – she maintained that unclean glasses lens had been proven to be a prime cause of pinkeye.

We stood in front of her desk while Miss Mounts completed her lens cleaning. She held the glasses up to the light for inspection, then wiped them some more, held them up, back and forth. Her glasses had thin gold wire frames, the only color other than black or white that adorned Miss Mounts. Finally she gave us an approving smile, placed her glasses on her nose and with each hand pushed the temple pieces over her ears. Then she placed the tissue inside the front of her black dress, behind the lace at the center of her ample bosom, with one corner of the tissue sticking out of the lace. I got so caught up in Miss Mounts' lens cleaning and tissue placement that I nearly forgot why we had come to the library.

“Let's get started,” she said, then took a deep breath, “and remember that whether in a school, town or state election, what you are about to do is a bedrock practice in our democracy.” She pushed the three large square boxes covered with orange and black crepe paper across her desk towards us. One box had the label, “Queen Ballots,” and the other two boxes had labels of “Junior Class Attendant Ballots” and “Sophomore Class Attendant Ballots.”

Miss Mounts then pursed her lips, which she often did whenever she studied on something, and watched us count. We first counted the ballots for election of the queen,

though I had no doubt about the outcome. June Ann Morris had been the favorite to win over Lola Sue Murrell, and sure enough, she won in a landslide.

At the school assembly when the candidates had been introduced, June Ann's curly black hair, bright blue eyes, and warm smile gave her a special beauty. When June Ann's opponent, Lola Sue, stood up, her red hair had glistened under the stage lights and her face turned a deep crimson. Her lower lip quivered and she thanked everybody for making her a finalist. Then she paused and flashed a big smile and said, "I myself am voting for June Ann Morris, and I hope you will too!"

For a moment the auditorium remained stone silent. Then the large room filled with a sudden burst of applause accompanied by whistling and stomping of feet. It continued for nearly a full minute.

Miss Mounts introduced the junior class finalists, Ruthie Southworth and Vera Mae Bledsoe, majorettes in the Kettle High marching band. Both of them had long black hair and wore their orange and black majorette uniforms with short skirts to the school assembly. At a distance I could hardly tell them apart. Ruthie and Vera Mae grinned and hugged each other, and then each of them pointed to the other and said "Vote for her." Everybody laughed, even our principal, Mr. Lawton.

We tallied the votes with special care. The Ruthie-Vera Mae contest ran neck-and-neck. Ruthie won, but by only a few votes.

William White, Susie Mac, and I then turned our attention to the sophomore class ballots, our class's representative in the Queen's Court. Betty Lou had let everybody know she wanted the honor and I figured that a lot of kids at Kettle High would feel she deserved it. William White and I sometimes wondered how Betty Lou Sovine always got

selected for one or another honor. William White argued that Betty Lou had to be a born leader, at least among girls. Last year she had been voted "Freshman Girl Who Has Done Most for Kettle High School." At the sock hop the week before the homecoming election Betty Lou had danced with each of the girls and every boy who would dance with her.

She'd drawn the attention of boys since early in the sixth grade when she began to develop pretty curves. Her blue eyes, blonde hair, always carefully styled, and near-perfectly formed lips gave her a look of beauty, though the look was offset a little by her long thin nose. One time in the sixth grade I stood in line at the pencil sharpener, just behind Betty Lou. When she bent over to pick up a scrap of paper I peeked over the front of her dress. She stood up and stared hard at me. My face felt all hot and red. Then Betty Lou broke into a big smile and said, so loud that everybody in the room could hear her, "Like what you see, Freddy? Take a picture, it'll last longer." A couple of kids in line giggled. Harley Cremeans, chubby and sweaty, stood in line right behind me. He pointed at me and let out with a big laugh, and then everybody in our class joined in.

At the assembly, after Betty Lou Sovine had been introduced she faced the audience, raised both arms waist-high, and motioned for kids to be quiet. She waited for complete silence in the auditorium. Betty Lou's face was so down-turned I thought she might cry.

Betty Lou spoke softly. Some kids leaned forward in their seats to hear her better. "Thank you for this great honor. I love Kettle High School. It will be my life, at least through my senior year, and after that I will come back to visit. And when I am dead and gone I will return to haunt these halls." Betty Lou paused, then sang in a slow romantic whisper, the first two lines of the Kettle High School Fight Song, "Let's give a cheer for

Kettle High School, for the colors orange and black” Her voice trailed off. She raised her right arm, put her fist in the air and yelled in a feisty voice, "Go, Tops!" Everybody cheered.

Cricket Hobson’s election as the other sophomore class finalist surprised me. After Miss Mounts had introduced her at the assembly, Cricket stood, smiled, and nodded to everyone. She looked at the audience, stood a while longer. I wanted her to give a speech, say something. Anything. Finally Cricket said, “Thank you for this honor,” then sat down.

After a period of silence, Miss Mounts brought her hands together with a loud smack and began to clap. Other teachers joined her, and then the student body joined them in what I’ll call polite applause. In the background Ralph Persinger and members of the football team laughed and yelled, “Go, Cricket!” and “Way to tell ’em, Cricket!” and things like that. Mr. Lawton whirled around with a scowl on his face and scanned the audience. I hoped Cricket didn’t hear Ralph and his friends, but her smile had disappeared. Later one of the girls in the Cedar Creek Gang said to her, “Cricket, you done *real good*.”

We counted the ballots and stacked them on Miss Mounts’s desk beside the name of each candidate. To my surprise, Betty Lou Sovine lagged way behind Cricket Hobson. I couldn’t believe it. From “Most Popular Freshman Girl” to just a handful of votes in the tenth grade – Betty Lou Sovine?

Susie Mac held the last ballot above the name of Cricket Hobson, and then released it. We watched the rectangular piece of paper float downwards and come to rest on top of Cricket’s large stack of ballots. During the downward movement of the ballot,

the pursed lips of Miss Mounts ceased to purse. Her full lips parted so slowly they stuck together in places for a few seconds, like an old Band-Aid being pulled off my arm. Miss Mounts's jaw moved downward and her mouth dropped fully open the moment the ballot came to rest on the stack. Eyes wide, she stared at the pile of ballots and gaped, a full, open-mouthed gape.

William White and Susie Mac fixed their gaze on the pile of ballots. Susie Mac's arm remained extended over the ballots and she swayed sidewise in the slow rhythm of the falling paper. Susie Mac's movements resembled the hula dance of Esther Williams in a movie at the Dixie Palace when she pretended to be a native Hawaiian dancer in order to fool Ricardo Montalban who pretended to be a wealthy trader from Spain. Susie Mac, swaying, William White, staring, and Miss Mounts, gaping. For a moment I wondered if some invisible force had us in its power, suspending everything except swaying, gaping, and staring.

The spell ended when Miss Mounts sucked in a wad of air then forcefully exhaled it, saying, "Well, I never..." Her mouth slammed shut and her lips locked as tight as the little curls on the back of her head.

Cricket Hobson – elected sophomore class Attendant to the nineteen and forty-five Homecoming Queen? I tried to imagine her posing for a *Kettle News Leader* photograph. Or riding on our sophomore class float in Friday afternoon's Homecoming parade. Or standing in the center of the football field during the half-time ceremony at Friday night's game. A member of the Queen's Court at the Homecoming dance?

My thoughts turned back to the minutes before our first-period history class and Cricket's writing what Mr. Johnson called a "radical lissst" on the board. Should I tell

Mr. Johnson? Miss Mounts? Should I tell anybody? Daddy once told me that when I had doubts about telling something, I probably shouldn't tell it. So far, that's what I had done – had I done the right thing?

Cricket had written the list for her own reasons, and kept it to herself. If I told her secret most likely I would bring trouble to her, maybe even cost her the election. Cricket hadn't been a close friend, but I felt a responsibility to protect her secret. But I had a responsibility as a Kettle High student too – to tell the truth to teachers, even Mr. Johnson.

Cricket's surprising election had been part of a plot fertilized, incubated, and hatched by Ralph Persinger. Ralph had joined our class after his Daddy retired and his family moved to Kettle about a year ago. He had brown hair and a muscular but chubby body, and acne spread around his face. Ralph had an older brother in the Army. Ralph's Daddy had owned and operated two coal mines down in Logan County. Sometimes Ralph bragged about how his Daddy bossed the miners around and showed them a thing or two when they tried to bring in the union. "I'll do the same thing if I ever get a chance," Ralph always added.

Last year, shortly after he had entered Kettle High, Ralph met Betty Lou Sovine and decided right then and there that he wanted to marry her. "Betty Lou is the prettiest girl in our class, and she's mine," he told the boys. Ralph told his friends that he and Betty Lou should date some so she could learn to feel the love for him that he felt for her. Ralph said to Billy Swan Ronk that he believed way down deep Betty Lou really liked him a lot, maybe already loved him. Billy Swan, short and skinny, had come to admire Ralph. Although he and Ralph claimed each other as best friends, Billy Swan told

William White, who told me, that Ralph had asked Betty Lou to go to a movie four times, and each time she said no.

In September, right before we had nominated girls for Homecoming Queen and her Court, Ralph had sat alongside Betty Lou in art class. Very politely he said, “Betty Lou, would you please pass me the art gum eraser?” When she handed him the eraser he leaned over and with a loud smack planted a wet kiss on her lips. Betty Lou screamed, wiped her lips and yelled, “Yuck!” Then she ran to the teacher, who told Ralph to go to Mr. Lawton’s office.

Ralph walked to the classroom door, then stopped and turned to the class. In a loud voice he said, “I was just givin’ her a little of what she wanted. Right, Betty Lou?” then he slammed the door behind him.

Later that afternoon William White and I had been in the boys’ locker room getting dressed for phys-ed class. A couple of lockers away, Ralph stood naked, holding his jock strap in one hand. He grinned and yelled at everybody to watch, and then put his jock strap on backwards over his head, with the strap around his forehead and the pouch on the back of his head. Then he said, “Betty Lou winked at me in art class – I believe this here is what she wants.” He put one hand underneath his privates and rubbed his member until it began to come to life. He acted like he had a new friend who wanted to meet everybody. With the guidance of Ralph’s hand, his long friend nodded his head up and down in a greeting to each of us.

William White and I pulled on our shorts and gym shoes and got out of there. He said, “Sometimes Ralph scares me.”

Ralph scared me too. One day he had pushed me out of his way as we came in the front door of Kettle High. Then Ralph turned towards me, like he expected me to do something back to him. I yelled at William White, a few steps ahead of me, to wait and then ran past Ralph. I wondered if I should have stood up to Ralph. Maybe if I had, and if other kids had, he'd have gotten tired of bullying everybody and doing the dumb things he did.

For a couple of days after he kissed Betty Lou, Ralph would buttonhole anybody who would listen and talked about how, down deep, Betty Lou liked, maybe loved, him. None of us had the courage to call him a liar. Ralph weighed nearly two hundred pounds and as a sophomore he had won the first team center position on the Kettle High football team. Sometimes Ralph would walk up behind a guy smaller than him and grab the back of the fellow's underpants and jerk them tight up against the guy's crotch. He did it so hard and fast the guy would gasp and yell, and Ralph and his buddies would laugh. Most of the fellows he grabbed never stuck around after Ralph let go of them. Ralph liked a fistfight.

Ralph kept his hair in place with liberal doses of oily Vaseline hair tonic. One time, sitting in a booth at Bertha's Place, he had leaned his head against the wall while he talked to his friends. When he sat up the wallpaper had a big oil spot. Bertha saw it, got all upset and told him to never do that again. After she had turned to walk to the front counter Ralph made a face at her and gave her the finger. All the guys in the booth laughed.

William White told me he had learned from Billy Swan that Ralph decided to get even with Betty Lou after what happened that day in art class. Ralph's first idea had been

to find a girl to run for sophomore class Homecoming Attendant who could beat Betty Lou in a one-on-one contest. But he hadn't been able to find the right girl to do it.

Then, and William White said Billy Swan beamed when he told this part of the story, Ralph developed what he called his reversal strategy. "We'll elect a girl whose victory will bring the high and mighty Miss Betty Lou Sovine – Miss Betty Lou Bovine – off her throne. The plainest, simplest girl in our class. A girl who hasn't never done nothin' for Kettle High School, and who isn't ever likely to." Billy Swan said Ralph spoke just two words, "Cricket Hobson."

When Cricket's name first had appeared as a candidate, everybody smiled and acted like it was a nice thing. "After all," Betty Lou Sovine said, "Cricket has never had an honor, and this is *awfully* nice for her."

At the introduction of candidates in classes or school assemblies, Cricket smiled and seemed proud. She always had her hair combed and wore a clean dress. Afterwards the girls in the Cedar Creek Gang would tell her, "You done *real good*," and Cricket would smile.

Ralph had convinced the sophomore boys on the football team to join him in his campaign. He told them to do whatever it took to get votes for Cricket or they'd answer to him. Lots of the players took smaller boys aside and said, "You better vote for Cricket or Ralph'll getcha." The junior and senior football players had laughed about it, but still told kids to do it as a joke.

And Ralph had done his part. Before school each morning he had gone around telling the boys in our class, "You, and your girl friend too, better vote for Cricket or I'll whip your ass."

At lunch in the cafeteria the day after Mr. Lawton announced the finalists in the election, I sat at a table near Ralph and some boys on the football team. They laughed about Cricket's making it to the finals and spouted a lot of pride in their political handiwork.

We finished our count of the ballots. Cricket had won the election – she would be the sophomore class Attendant in the Queen's Court. Miss Isabel B. Mounts nodded at Susie Mac, William White, and me. Behind the lens of her glasses her eyes closed and opened in two prolonged eye-bats. "This is quite a surprise," she said, "one I am not sure is in the best interests of Kettle High School." She turned and walked at a fast pace to the black intercom speaker mounted on the wall, pushed the toggle switch down and spoke into it in a slow and serious manner. "Mr. Lawton, Mr. Lawton." Miss Mounts then returned the toggle switch to its up position, and held it between her thumb and index finger as though it had a life of its own.

In a few seconds we heard an electronic squeak and the voice of Mr. Lawton. "Yes, Miss Mounts?"

"Please come to the library as soon as possible. I think we have a difficulty – a problem in the order of things."

After she had toggled the switch to its up position, Miss Mounts let her fingers rest on the toggle switch for a moment and stared at the intercom speaker.

What problem did we have in the order of things? Sure, Cricket lived up on Cedar Creek where those former miners settled, but like it or not she had been elected. Maybe if I had spoken up about what happened in Mr. Johnson's room the outcome of the election would have been different. But I didn't, and the results stood. Leaving Ralph Persinger

out of it, Cricket won something important. Tall, skinny, and shy, Cricket didn't have the good looks of Betty Lou Sovine. But she won.

When Mr. Lawton walked in the door of the library, his grey suit coat unbuttoned and his salt and pepper hair mussed. Miss Mounts asked us to leave. I could have stayed and told Mr. Lawton about Cricket's list, but I didn't.

The morning after the election, a Wednesday, when I walked into Mr. Johnson's classroom Cricket and the Cedar Creek Gang had taken their seats. The word must have gotten out about Cricket's winning the election. She had a big grin on her face and her friends beamed. One of them held Cricket's hand. Betty Lou Sovine rested her head on her desk.

The blackboard still had Mr. Johnson's list: Prohibition, the Beckley fire, the Huntington flood. Beside it another "radical list" had been written, covering the identical years as Mr. Johnson's most recent list. It had the same handwriting as the list on Tuesday.

Real History – The West Virginia Coal Mines Wars

- 1912 Paint Creek and Cabin Creek miners strike to get recognition of the United Mine Workers of America
 - Governor Glasscock declares martial law three times, sends troops
 - March 26, 83 killed in underground mine disaster at Jed
 - September 21, Mother Jones leads march of miners' children through Charleston
- 1913 February 12, Mother Jones leads protest of mine conditions and is arrested
 - May 8, Mother Jones released from jail

Mr. Johnson walked in, looked at the new list, and erased it. Then he made us hold out our hands, palms up. He walked around the room inspecting us for chalk dust. He didn't find any.

“We seem to have a secret radical here among us. One who wants to be a history teacher.” Mr. Johnson jabbed his American history book towards us and lowered his voice, “Maybe it’s one of you that done this, maybe it isn’t. But sooner or later I’ll know. You can count on that, just like the sun rising tomorrow morning. It’s only a matter of time. *Count on it.*”

By then he had walked to his desk at the front of the room. He paused and his expression softened. He looked around the room, licked his lips and smiled a narrow and stretched out smile that reminded me of a fox eating yellow jackets. “And once the truth is known, I’ll deal with the child who did this. Only a child would consider this sordid side of our great state’s history worthy of even mentioning.” His voice began to rise. “And I’ll deliver to our wayward child the one thing a child understands, or my name is not Veloit Velmer Johnson.” He paused and cast his large eyes around the room. A loud crack sounded as he slammed his history book on the desk with so much force the floor shook.

After a brief silence, Ralph Persinger raised his hand.

“Yes, Ralph?”

“Mr. Johnson, everybody knows we had Reds, Communists, among the UMW organizers down in the coalfields. Maybe there’s one here at Kettle High. A Red, I mean. When you find out who wrote this stuff on our blackboard I hope you’ll have ’em arrested. That’s what my Daddy done when he found some organizers who was working in his mines.”

What if I'd reported Cricket to Mr. Johnson – would she have been arrested? Had Cricket broken the law when she wrote her lists? Had I broken the law by not speaking up? Would I be arrested too? A little shiver ran deep inside of me.

All through the day my secret about Cricket weighed on me. I needed to talk to somebody. I could tell William White but I didn't think he'd be able to help. And he might blab the whole thing to somebody. My Daddy might know what to do, but I wondered if he'd punish me for breaking the law. One time after I broke a neighbor's window with a baseball, Daddy told me I had to go tell what I'd done and then buy them a new pane of glass. And, worst of all, I couldn't play baseball for a week. Daddy knew right from wrong.

That evening after supper I helped Daddy rake some leaves in the yard. When it got too dark to rake we came in the kitchen and sat down. Momma poured each of us a glass of cold cider and went upstairs. Daddy took off his heavy sweater. He grinned at me and held up his glass in a silent toast. I did the same.

Then I described to Daddy what I saw early on Tuesday morning in Mr. Johnson's classroom, and how Ralph had engineered Cricket's election. What Ralph had said about the person who wrote the lists on the board being a Red – somebody who should be arrested.

Daddy leaned back in his chair and gave me a serious, not angry, look. He took another sip of his cider then told me what Cricket had done in writing her lists hadn't been against the law. He said, "Maybe she broke some rules at school, but not the law." For a moment Daddy looked down at his glass at cider, and then he looked at me. "You're on the front side of a tough choice, Freddy. How do you see it?"

We talked about my responsibilities – to the school and to my friends. I told him I felt loyal to the school, but just couldn't be a tattletale and turn Cricket in. "Still, I'm uneasy about not telling the truth when asked."

"I know you are, Freddy, and I'm proud of you. But I think you've done the right thing by keeping it to yourself, at least for now. Give it a little time. Sometimes hard knots work themselves out in natural ways."

The next morning we had no new – radical – list on the blackboard. Just another Thursday with Mr. Johnson in his brown suit. Mr. Johnson announced, "Today, our lesson is a look at the Great War, and West Virginia before and after it. Nineteen and fourteen to nineteen and twenty four." He picked up a stick of chalk, turned to the board and began to write his new list.

He no longer had to tell us to copy his lists into our notes. While everybody wrote down Mr. Johnson's new list, William White leaned over and whispered, "I'll never remember all this stuff. Maybe I should move to Kentucky."

- 1914 A glass manufacturing plant, later part of the Owens-Illinois Co., begins operations in Huntington
- 1915 Supreme Court rules West Virginia owes Virginia more than \$12.3 million a debt from the time of separation from Virginia
- 1916 Amendment allowing suffrage for women rejected in November
- 1917 US enters World War I. 45,000 West Dixie Palaces see active service, 624 are killed in action
- 1919 Governor Cornwell signs a bill creating the Dept. of Public Safety (W.Va. State Police), the fourth in the nation
- 1920 Hull of the second *West Virginia* (Battleship No. 48 to the Navy) was laid
- 1921 KDKA broadcast the first football game ever on radio, WVU vs. University of Pittsburgh
West Virginia becomes the first state to have a sales tax
- 1922 International Nickel Company plant begins operations in Huntington
- 1924 Beckley's first daily newspaper, the *Evening Post*, begins publication

William White and I stayed up late that Thursday night helping our class decorate the gym for the Friday night Homecoming dance. Cricket's election as sophomore class Queen's Attendant seemed the only topic anybody would talk about. Two of Betty Lou's friends made fun of Cricket by pinning their hair up in a box-like shape.

We hung red, white and blue bunting along with crepe paper – mostly orange and black – all over the gym. William White climbed a ladder and dropped crepe paper streamers of all colors from the ceiling lights, and then attached narrow rolls of orange crepe paper to the seating area above one side of the gym floor to the stands on the other side. Once done, the many connecting strands of crepe paper created a new and colorful ceiling over the area of the gym floor where we would dance. One of the teachers smiled and told us the gym looked like a set for a Judy Garland movie. Kids grinned with pride.

On Friday morning William White ran up to me just outside the door to Mr. Johnson's room, all excited. "The radical struck again, Freddy – we got a new list."

I muttered, "Dear God, please end this. Make her stop. Amen."

We walked into the room. Not a sound, quiet as church. Everybody stood at the front of the room reading the huge new list that started and ended with the same years as Mr. Johnson's long list from yesterday.

- Real History – The West Virginia Coal Mines Wars
More men die underground in explosions, cave-ins –
- 1914 April 28, 192 killed in mine disaster at Eccles
 - 1915 March 2, 112 killed in mine disaster at Layland
 - 1917 Department of Special Deputy Police, wartime internal security force, established
 - 1919 September, miners march in Logan County to unseat Sheriff Don Chafin, federal forces called in
November, nationwide coal strike
 - 1920 May 19, "Matewan Massacre" – ten people shot to death after Police Chief Sid Hatfield tries to arrest "detectives" (thugs) working for the coal operators. One of the dead is Mayor Cable Testerman (a good man)

- Martial law in Mingo County
- 1921 Three day battle along shores of Tug River
“Volunteer State Police” organized by coal operators
Women and children gunned down in raids on miners’ tent settlements
August 1, walking to his trial, Chief Sid Hatfield is shot and killed on steps of McDowell County Courthouse
August 21, National Guard activated
August 25, federal troops and military planes called in
September 3, Battle of Blair Mountain, bombs dropped on miners
- 1922 May, “Treason Trial” of miners who were in march on Logan and Battle of Blair Mountain
- 1924 April 28, 119 killed in mine disaster at Benwood Number 9

During the time we read the new list, Mr. Johnson had walked into the classroom. He stood behind me and whispered, “Sweet Jesus.” Then his bass voice boomed, his words moving air across the back of my neck. “Everybody take your seats.”

Everybody sat down and Mr. Johnson stood in front of our class. He looked at us and didn’t speak. I checked the clock on the wall above Mr. Johnson’s desk, opened my notebook and wrote down the time. I studied “8:07” like it would to be on a test. Mr. Johnson continued to look at us, one by one. Kids shifted around in their seats. I stared at the curly hair on the back of Harley Cremeans head until I got tired of it. I looked up at the clock again and found two minutes had passed – I wrote down the new time and double underlined it.

Finally Mr. Johnson spoke. “I started teaching in nineteen and eleven, just in time for the Beckley fire the following spring. That fire didn’t stop me though. I wrote new lesson plans and kept at it. And while us honest, God fearing folks was out there working, the miners was organizing, preparing to shut down all,” he raised his voice and repeated, “*all*,” then paused, “of the mines in southern West Virginia. Of course most of us didn’t know that. We thought the miners was just going to work like everybody else. But in the

darkness underground, and in the darkness of night above ground, serious crimes, even treason, was afoot.

“When the Great War came, I was not allowed to serve. My vision was too poor, the doctors told me. I told ’em it was good enough to play football in high school and I wanted to fight in the Army. But they wouldn’t listen.” Mr. Johnson told us his opportunity to serve came after the war, in the summers of nineteen and nineteen, twenty and twenty-one.

“I went to Logan County and worked as a deputy for Sheriff Don Chapin. I packed a sidearm and we showed the miners – the radicals, troublemakers, and rednecks with red bandannas around their necks – a thing or two. The law is the law.”

His words, “the law is the law,” echoed in my thoughts. If Mr. Johnson had been on the side of right, by not speaking up had I put myself on the side of wrong? Daddy’s words about hard knots working themselves out came to me.

Mr. Johnson spoke with a touch of pride. “In August and September of twenty-one I lugged supplies up one side of Blair Mountain and carried men, most of ’em wounded and a two of ’em dead, back down the mountain. I sent up smoke signals directing planes towards the rednecks. I hit the ground when the bombs exploded.

“But all that I did, and everything on that radical list you see before you, was just a tiny chirp in the symphony of our great state’s history. A tiny and off-key chirp. Hardly worth the space it occupies on the blackboard, or the time it has taken this morning in this classroom.”

Mr. Johnson paused and his magnified eyes surveyed the room. “Now, open your books to page one hundred and twenty-three and we’ll start today’s lesson.” He turned to

the blackboard. The eraser in his right hand had just touched the first word on the radical list when a soft voice called out from the back of the room, “Mr. Johnson?”

I turned and saw Cricket Hobson standing beside her desk.

“Mr. Johnson, down in Mingo County, in eighteen and ninety, they took my Granddaddy’s farm from him – men in shiny suits carrying briefcases. They said the railroad owned all the minerals under his land. Then they took over everything above the ground to get to the coal.”

Cricket stopped speaking and her lower lip quivered. When she spoke again her voice cracked. “My Daddy was a coal miner at Switchback. Sixty-seven men he knew died in that mine, but he lived to tell about it. After that he helped miners organize for safety and decent pay.”

Mr. Johnson’s mouth fell open. Then he sputtered, “I..I...That’ll be quite enough out of you, Cricket.” He raised himself to his full height and stomped the heel of his right foot hard against the floor. “Sit down and shut up!”

Cricket continued to stand. She said, “When the coal company found out what my Daddy was doing with the other miners, they threw him and his wife and little baby boy out of their house. Daddy moved his family into a tent camp along with other miners thrown out of their homes.”

Mr. Johnson’s eyes darted around the room, back to Cricket, then around the room again. His face turned a deep red and he spoke in a loud voice, just short of yelling. “I said, young lady, sit down.” He began to walk towards her.

Cricket spoke faster and louder, “One night in the middle of the winter, when my Daddy was at a meeting, sheriff’s deputies raided the tent camp.” Then she screamed, “My Daddy’s wife and baby boy were shot to death!”

Mr. Johnson stopped in his tracks.

Cricket paused and looked at Mr. Johnson who looked at her with his big eyes.

Then she spoke softly, “My Daddy stood with Sid Hatfield at Matewan. And he was on the other side of Blair Mountain from you, Mr. Johnson. He was shot in battle, and he killed the man who did it. He was proud of the red bandanna he wore around his neck.” Cricket sat down.

The room had a silence that resembled the quiet that settles over Kettle after a hard thunderstorm – you knew something powerful had just happened. I gripped my desk top so tight my knuckles turned white.

Mr. Johnson flipped the toggle switch on his intercom and announced to Mr. Lawton that Cricket Hobson would be coming to the office. Then he yelled at Cricket, “Leave this room, now. Now! Go to the principal’s office.”

Cricket put her shoulders back and stood straight and tall. She walked towards the classroom door. Before she got to the door, the Cedar Creek Gang stood and joined her.

“You girls – back in your seats,” Mr. Johnson yelled. They never looked at Mr. Johnson, and followed Cricket out the door.

Then Beverly Shade stood and walked to the door. She turned and looked at me. I wanted to join her but feared Mr. Johnson. Cricket’s lists flashed through my thoughts. I stood on wobbly knees, got my bearings and walked to her.

Mr. Johnson's mouth fell open as one by one our entire class stood and followed the Beverly and the Cedar Creek Gang out of the classroom. Well, almost our entire class. Everybody arrived at Mr. Lawton's office except Ralph Persinger and Billy Swan Ronk.

Mr. Lawton took one look at the classroom full of students filing into his small office and told us all to go to the library. When we got there we started to laugh and slap each other and Cricket on the back. Beverly took my hand, beamed at me. With all the noise, you'd have thought we'd already won the Homecoming football game. Miss Mounts told us to be quiet, which we found hard to do.

At a fast clip Mr. Lawton headed down the hall towards Mr. Johnson's classroom. As he rounded the first corner in the hallway he nearly collided with Billy Swan Ronk, who joined us in the library. I wished I could have been a little mouse in the corner and listened to Mr. Johnson and Mr. Lawton. Right before noon Mr. Lawton called Cricket Hobson to his office.

Word of all that had happened spread during lunch hour. Before lunch hour ended, Cricket joined the Cedar Creek Gang in the cafeteria at their usual table. They wore big smiles. By the time we returned to class no one talked about anything else. Our afternoon class schedule continued as usual, but things had changed.

At three o'clock on a sunny but cold Friday afternoon a few days later, the Homecoming parade rolled down Main Street. A reviewing stand had been erected in front of the Bank of Kettle. Mr. Lawton and a few of the teachers, as well as Mayor Baumgartner, sat in folding metal chairs on the stand. The Kettle High marching band led the parade, although the majorettes marched without Ruthie Southworth. Ruthie wore a

fur coat over her long blue dress and sat high on the junior class float as Queen's Attendant. The floats had been decorated with colorful crepe paper and carried large posters and banners that called for the Tops to win the Homecoming game. The football team stood on the bed of a blue Dodge flatbed truck and the players waved at the crowd. June Ann Morris sat atop the senior class float and looked regal in her flowing red gown, though in the chilly air she had put a heavy wool blue coat around her shoulders.

Our sophomore class float had fewer decorations than the other floats, for we had to decorate the gym along with our float. But the float had lots of colored crepe paper and a couple of large signs with bright red letters, "Go Tops!" Cricket sat on a riser in the center of the float. She wore a lacy light blue gown with crinolines that fluffed her skirt outwards at least a foot, maybe more. Cricket had bare shoulders – no coat. She beamed a radiant smile. Even William White said that Cricket looked kind of pretty.

Just as our sophomore class float approached the reviewing stand, Cricket's right hand pulled something from beneath her. Then she tied a red bandanna around her neck.