Fire in the Field and Other Stories

In Praise of This Collection

I really did enjoy, no, love John Young's stories; they are quite magical and written with amazing clarity. Each story is filled with epiphanies large and small. Poignant and elegiac, Young's writing is smooth and clear and deeply moving, with flashes of humor and deep empathy for lovingly created characters. These stories are a worthy heir to those of John Cheever and John Updike.

–Daniel Brown, Editor, Aeqai (www.aeqai.com)

John Young follows his fine first novel, When the Coin Is In the Air, with a book of stories of middle Americans faced with decisions – moral, ethical, romantic, financial – "while the coin is in the air."

–Dan Wakefield, author of New York in the Fifties and How Do We Know When Its God?

I said Let me read a few minutes of these stories before I start dinner. At midnight I was still crying, laughing, and fond of Young's ability to take me with him. I entered a furniture repair shop rife with lies, the innards of a rotting pumpkin, a chainsaw–accident scene, 12 acres of burning hay.

At last, a father–son story that abandons schmaltz and tackles hilarity; bored–couple syndrome without melodrama; dialog so real I forgot I was in my living room.

That's my old minister, I thought, my neighbor, my sister–in–law, ME! Young focuses his people–reading and peers right through me, directing his spotlight onto my pride, mistakes and miseries. Phrases such as "slowly cooking in the heat of anger..." and "lifting a layer of snow like a sheet on a clothesline," add as much impact as his uncanny understanding of who we are.

–Connie Shakalis, Columnist, The Bloomington Herald–Times (ConnieShakalis.com)

There's so much to like in this "album." The stories are well plotted and engrossing, the characters interesting, and the writing stunning. Young has unusual skill with language, an ear for voices, and a way with images. I like the shifts in perspective, the way protagonists struggle with the ethical implications of their actions, the themes of competition and sexual jealousy, and the way some seem satisfied with their positions in life (the joy of being a mailman) while their partners are restless, wanting something they think has higher status. Keeping the tone of the whole, each story provides a surprising shift in the nature of the dilemmas it addresses. My current favorite, the closing story, "In a Delicate Condition," is simultaneously heartbreaking and heartwarming.

–Joanna Marshall, Retired Professor of English Literature, University of Puerto Rico

As one story progresses to the next, Young's deceptively simple voice evolves; the innocent peculiarities become more complex, and the stories deepen shockingly – as if fate has caught us, and Young himself, in the best hopes of literature. Fire in the Field and Other Stories is the real thing.

–Frederick Dillen, author of the novels, Hero, Fool, and Beauty

What sets these exquisitely crafted stories apart is John Young's keen sense of place and his ability to make you feel you are there. Not just physical places, but states of mind too. And so you feel conflicted sitting with an anxious teenager talking with her mother. You are afraid alongside a boy chasing an angry father. You are bereft as you gaze upon the empty chair of the only friend who really understood you. In these 16 superb stories, you won't just read about such situations. You'll be immersed in them. You'll be transported.

–Don Tassone, author of Francesca

Fire in the Field and Other Stories by John Young is an elegant, wry, wise, witty collection that deserves a place among the best work being produced today. These are quintessentially middle-American stories with richly textured characters struggling to navigate the complex, morally compromised world in which they live. Young is a writer who knows his craft and deserves the attention of a wide audience.

–Patricia Averbach, author of Resurrecting Rain

A Gift from John Updike to a Young Writer

When our author was a young writer living in Beverly, Massachusetts, he got to know John Updike. When "The Antique Deal," was published in Yankee in 1998, the famous writer sent this note:

Congratulations; it's a lovely story, full of fine furniture details. It made me think I should change professions, but I'll have to learn how to pronounce 'patina.' Appearing in Yankee is a fine honor, even if some of the editing drew blood. It's a bloody business, in a way.

Best wishes,
John Updike

Fire in the Field and Other Stories

by

John Young

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For Lauren

Acknowledgements

One winter night, a writer friend of mine compared a short story collection to a record album–from the days of vinyl and CDs–where the first song sets the tone for the album and it ends with a strong one that makes you want to revisit the whole. Songs in the middle take risks and stretch for something new, different, and emotional. That made sense to me. Like those albums, your favorite story may be waiting in the middle of this collection. My hope is, like a favorite album, you'll revisit these stories and discover a new favorite each time.

*

There are so many people to thank for lending a hand in my life and on these stories. A consistent source of encouragement, learning, and support in my life is the creative cadre of Jeff Bell, Paul Kroner, and Ron MacLean. I also want to thank Neal and Betsy Delmonico at Golden Antelope Press. Their wit, intelligence, and encouragement kept me going. This is my second book with them, after my novel When The Coin Is In The Air. Two of the stories, "Fire in the Field" and "Enter Debbie DeVore" were chapters in the novel and appear here in a slightly edited form. Special thanks to Jeff Bell for pointing out those stories hiding in the novel. The story "A Pumpkin Summer" inspired my yet-to-be-published second novel: Getting Huge. "The Antique Deal" first appeared in Yankee Magazine.

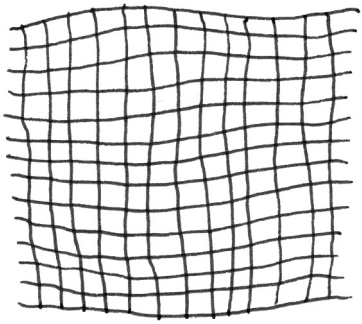
I want to thank my former professors and classmates in the MFA program at Emerson College in Boston where a few of these stories began. Two writer friends offered insights and suggestions–thank you Don Tassone and Andrea Kay. Because books are judged by their covers, I owe a special debt to the graphic designer/illustrator who captured the spirit of these stories–thank you to my son, Nick Young.

As usual there's a family behind the artist, and in this, I am more fortunate than I deserve. To Lauren, my wife and north star, thank you for believing in me and encouraging me all these years. To my kids, Nick and Tess, it has been a great joy to see you grow into adults I admire and learn from. Thank you for your support on this book. And finally, to you, dear reader, thank you. I appreciate every reader.

Contents

Fire in the Field and Other Stories

This Boy's Game



As deliberately as he had ever emerged from a dugout, Buddy "Slugger" Rogers stepped from his Jeep Cherokee and lumbered toward the factory gate, squeezing the sticky pine tar on his baseball bat.

The guard, a guy who'd played left field on the company team for a couple of years, scrambled from the glass booth. "Hey, Buddy. Ho, Buddy," his palms waving like paddles. "Can't let you in, Slugger."

"Outta the way," Buddy held off his ex-teammate with a stiff-arm and entered the executive parking lot, passing the "RCA Executives Only" sign without breaking stride. "Ain't gonna hurt nobody," he said. At the first oversized American car, he poked out

the driver–side window with the bat, kind of cue–stick style. As the smell of leather seats reached him, he thought of the executive getting cold as he drove home that February night. By the fourth car, a Lexus SUV, Buddy was ramming the end of the bat through the glass and picturing an unsuspecting manager's head on the other side. Wham, right in the temple, bastard's skull shattering into little bits like the safety glass. By the time two factory security guards arrived–revolvers drawn–Buddy had both hands at the end of the bat swinging freely. Cubes of glass crunching under his feet as he stepped into his natural–looking swing to line–drive side mirrors off and spider–web windshields.

The guards, one tall and paunchy the other small and thin, eased Buddy's bat out of his hand and silently escorted him to his red, fourteen–year–old Jeep.

"Management figured something like this might happen," the tall guard said. "Damages will come out of your severance pay."

Buddy nodded. Then he said: "Them bastards, moving the whole friggin' thing to friggin', Mexico."

"It's a bitch, Buddy," the big guard said. Buddy didn't know the guards, but a lot of people at the plant knew Buddy Slugger Rogers. He was the best baseball player ever to suit up for RCA in the Indiana Industrial League. Nine times he'd made the I.I.L. all–star team.

"It ain't right," Buddy said, "moving Radio Corporation of America to Mexico."

"They've thrown us a curve, but what can you do when seventeen–year–olds down there work for thirty cents an hour and no benefits?" the big guard said.

Was that a whiff of whiskey Buddy smelled?

"These guys didn't make the decision anyway," the small guard said, chinning toward the management lot. "They're getting transferred or laid off too. Company headquarters is where you ought to bust a few windows."

"Maybe I will," Buddy said. "Where is it?"

"Hell, I'm not even sure," small guard said.

"Me neither," added old whiskey breath, "Indianapolis?" and the three of them shared a sardonic laugh and shook their heads.

"Pick up your bat tomorrow," said small guard.

"Keep it," Buddy tossed off and climbed into the Jeep. "Don't suppose I'll need the bat this spring." He started his truck then forced a laugh, "I went out with a bang, hey fellas? Batter up!"

The guards smiled, and the small one said, "Take it easy, Slugger. You'll get another job."

Roaring out of the lot, he rushed to get away from the factory as the shame of smashing up those cars came upon him. When he played ball, a determination, a hatred of losing, a concentrated rage rose in him like something brutal. Pitchers called him a mean son-of-a-bitch for his look that threatened and challenged. He never hesitated to take out a second baseman to prevent a double play or to blast a catcher who dared to block the plate. Off the field, he was a fairly easy-going guy. But something had snapped as he passed the gates of the executive parking lot and he reached in the back seat for his bat. What had it proved? He winced at the thought of himself smashing up those luxury cars and SUVs–side mirror cables jutting out like the veins of torn-off arms. Even in the moment, it had given him no satisfaction the way hitting a baseball always did. It had only served to blow most of his meager severance pay, probably all of it. What remained was embarrassment and the sweet smell of pine tar on his hands.

The pink slip burned in his shirt pocket. Another job? He didn't want no job. A man needed work, that was a fact, but his stupid job was just a job. It was the baseball he wanted.

He wondered if he could get a job at one of the other factories with a Division One Indiana Industrial League team. There were just two others in south-central Indiana. Westinghouse had frozen hiring a year ago, and at Cummins Engine in Columbus, UAW guys

cattled-up around the block for any job opening. So he wasn't going to play for those teams.

Buddy had soldered wiring and computer chips on the RCA assembly line for ten seasons, since he was nineteen, in exchange for center field and clean-up in the batting order. And for money. The paycheck meant more to Rhonda than Buddy.

Rhonda, he was in no hurry to see her, or the girls, so he decided to drive back to Nema the long way, through Sycamore Springs State Park. The radio said it was one o'clock and fifty-two degrees, a warm and sunny February day, the kind of day that usually inspired thoughts of spring and baseball. Management had laid off his production group at noon and gave them the afternoon off. Didn't know what he'd do when he got home. Didn't know what he'd do tomorrow. The Jeep slowed; shit, man . . . wouldn't see the guys from his production group again, wouldn't see his old teammates. Wake up, have breakfast, and then what? Job hunt, open the classifieds. He'd never really looked for a job before. He'd probably have to go to those career counseling sessions at the plant. All of that started tomorrow morning—unemployment. The morning would drag into a long afternoon, with Rhonda working in the house doing the books for two shops in town.

Rhonda had worried about the layoffs. When he lied about his production group manufacturing components for the Mexico plant, he'd almost convinced himself. But knew she doubted his words. So he was in no hurry to get home and tell her the truth. Not now. Not yet.

Rumbling along the park's rutted gravel road, Buddy noted a grove of hickories by their shaggy bark. It was his favorite tree. He let the Jeep Cherokee roll to a stop and looked into the winter-gray woods. Must be a million baseball bats in the hickories along this road, he thought.

Then he told himself: They can take your job, Slugger, but there's no way they can take your baseball. Pull yourself up by

your bootstraps. Don't get into a slump.

Right then, he decided to go pro like he should have eleven years ago. The Jeep started moving again. At twenty–nine, he'd be an old rookie at spring tryouts, but he was bigger, stronger, and smarter than when he got drafted out of high school. He really knew the game now.

If not for his father's death from a heart attack in the spring of Buddy's senior year and his mother's break down from it, he would've signed. But he had to get a job and carry the whole crew, kid brother and two little sisters. Couldn't let the younger ones quit school to get jobs. Even if he'd signed to play pro ball, back then farm teams barely paid prospects enough to live on. He had to stay. "Everything happens for a reason," became his mother's mantra when she sent him off to Nema Lumber Yard each morning. Buddy wasn't sure if she repeated it for him or for herself. Like a dog chasing a squirrel and getting choked at the end of his chain, Buddy almost caught his dream, and he had a hell of a time seeing any "reason" for his father's death or for killing his pro baseball career.

About the time tryout offers came the next spring, Rhonda got pregnant. So he married her. Buddy never regretted getting married to Rhonda, and from the day Kate was born, he never, ever regretted becoming a father. Not when Melanie came along three years later either. He and Rhonda had struck a deal before Kate was born–he got to name the girls and she got to name the boys. That's because he wanted to name a boy Mel and Rhonda hated that name for some reason. But that didn't stop him from naming his second daughter Melanie and calling her Mel all the time. And while he had to acknowledge a biased eye, those two little girls were the brightest and best looking kids in Nema, bar none. Kate and Mel, a pair of sprites, and they both loved baseball too.

After he and Rhonda got married, her old man got Buddy on at RCA in Bloomington. Good thing too, because Slugger's success

in the Indiana Industrial League and the legend of Horace Hopper were the only things that kept him going to work. Years ago the Pirates pulled Horace Hopper out of the I.I.L, and he made a career out of bloop singles. That pud knocker couldn't carry Buddy's jock, and Old Horace made it. Half those candy asses up there today, crying about their millions, didn't have his stick, his arm, or his glove. "This boy's game is complete," a scout from the Reds had told Coach Sloan when Buddy was in high school. Then the scout put a stubby arm around Buddy, "You're the complete package, kid." That was eleven years ago. And he was better now, damn it. He was. If everything did happen for a reason, he'd prove it this spring.

In his excitement, Buddy drove faster on the gravel road, too fast. Pebbles clanging in the wheel wells. Buddy stretching a double into a triple. He burst over a rise and slammed into a wash-out. The Jeep was built for rough roads, but not that rough and not at that speed. Splashing in and bouncing over rocks he got to the other side. Now the steering wheel was cockeyed, and the Jeep nosed for the ditch. Totally whacked out of alignment.

Shit, there goes 90 bucks, Buddy thought. He slowed down but kept his excitement about going to spring training. Now he wanted to tell Rhonda.

"Hey, Rhonda," he cheered when he walked in, back-kicking the kitchen door to latch it as he slipped off his jacket. He paced through the house to find her at the dining room table and was irritated by the dread on her face.

"What?" he said.

"That's what I was going to say." She closed her bookkeeping. "Why're you home so early? You got laid off…"

"I got good news."

"Yeahhh?" she said warily.

"Yeah. I got laid off today–"

"Oh, no." Rhonda blanketed his chipper tone.

He felt anger rising, but reined it in and tried to recapture his optimism. "Hey, listen, Babe. There's a good part. Okay, here's the good part. I'm going to Florida for spring training." He punched his fist into his palm, into his imaginary glove. "I'm gonna play pro ball. There's nothing holding me back now."

He had never hit her pretty face (never hit her at all and never would), but this was the expression her face would take if he had. "Except a wife, two kids, and a mortgage," she said.

"After I catch on with a team, we'll rent an apartment in that city. We can keep this place for the off–season–lot of guys do that–or buy a big house over on Elm Street."

"What about school?"

"They got schools all over the country, Rhonda. Besides, most of the season is during summer vacation."

"What if you don't make a team?"

That was it. "Look," he said–suddenly his ear itched and he scratched it hard, digging his finger in as if he could pull that doubt out of his head–"what I need from you right now is support. I can do this. And I will do this. With you or without. Even if I got stuck in Double–A for a season, I'd pull down what I made at RCA."

"Buddy, I love you, and I know you love baseball–"

"More than anything."

That statement hung for a moment "–but it's a boys' game, and maybe it's time for you to give it up."

"I shoulda known I couldn't count on you. I shoulda known." Now he recalled all her bitching about how much time he gave baseball. Playing, and volunteer coaching at the high school, and going to games, and watching them on TV, and reading about baseball in the sports page or in magazines–Rhonda liked to call herself a baseball widow to friends. But his family never went hungry, and he took the girls along to games sometimes.

Once he'd tried to explain to her how he loved the drama of a game. No one knew the outcome until the end of the ninth

inning–history in the making. That's what made sports the best entertainment (and baseball the best of sports because in football or basketball the outcome can be obvious in the last minutes). Better than movies where somebody knew the ending, even if it was only the creators. Buddy felt duped by that. Rhonda hadn't understood.

He'd slow cooked another speech over years, and he finally took the lid off. "Here's how it is," he rolled his weight from one foot to another like he did in the batter's box before the pitch came in, "baseball is what I do and is what I am. Like a doctor is a doctor, a first–class baseball player is a baseball player. He might be other things too, a husband, a father, even a lousy factory worker, but he is a baseball player first. You knew I was a baseball player before you married me." He paused for a second to consider if he wanted to ... to burn off this whole field, but sometimes you have to burn off a field before you can plow and replant. "To be first class–at anything–you got to make sacrifices, and I want to be a first–class baseball player. If something gets in the way," he pointed at her, "it gets shoved aside. Got it?"

"Oh, I got it all right," she said through tears of fury. She stood up to face him. "You're so full of horse shit, Buddy, your eyes are brown. You don't think I've made sacrifices? Now listen up, Pete Rose." She was the one pointing now. "I'm a first–class parent. And you know what it means to be a first–class mom in a family where the father puts baseball first? It's like being a single parent for six months. Actually year–round, because even when you're here, you're not here. You're mentally off chasing a pop fly or swinging your bat. I have to work twice as hard to keep the family together. That's my sacrifice."

God–damn he loved her. How could you help but love that no–shit personality? If the world had half her spunk, he thought, it would be twice as interesting.

"They're blue," he said, feeling himself grin.

"What!?"

"My eyes." He fluttered them at her, dipping his chin to his shoulder.

"Don't get cute, Buddy. I'm good and mad. I hardly ever complain about your love for this boys' game. When we were first married and the girls were little, you talked about going down for spring training, and I never objected. But you never went. Why not? In all these years, I never said you couldn't play, or coach, or watch. I figured you'd outgrow it. Now I want to know when. When will you outgrow it?" She took a breath and let that hang in the air.

Then she said: "You always say, everything happens for a reason." She was right, he had picked that up from his mother. "Maybe the reason you got laid off is that it's time to quit baseball."

"You got it wrong," he insisted. "It's the other way around. The reason is so I can play pro ball before it's too late."

"Why didn't you go before? When we just had Kate or before the girls were in school?"

He didn't answer. He didn't know the answer.

Now it was her turn to pause, and he wondered what was coming. Then she wound up and delivered, "Honey, you know you never really learned to hit a good curve. What do you think Major League pitchers would do to you?"

Now she was throwing at his head, a cheap shot. "You never believed in me, but I'll show you." He rushed, almost sprinted, out of the house.

"I'll show everybody," he muttered as he got in his Jeep. Down the drive, but not fast. The weight of his talk with Rhonda was already taking hold, his ear itching again. Besides, he had to wrestle the wheel to keep the Jeep out of the ditch. As he realized what an ass he'd been to his wife, the anger flowed out of him. He regretted the bullshit threat in his: 'if something gets in the way, it gets shoved aside.' She was right. He'd given too much to the

game. Now it was his chance to make all that he'd given pay off, to collect as a pro. Yes, he'd have to give up baseball someday. But not yet. He was only twenty-nine, and the bigs were full of guys in their thirties. Some were forty. Still, shoulda kept his big mouth shut, hitting her with the lay-off and then leaving for spring training. Stupid. He'd have to apologize. When he did, he knew she wouldn't blow it out of proportion and kick his ass with it. That wasn't her way, and it was one reason he loved her so much. She wouldn't take his crap, but she could take being wronged. The woman had backbone, and he loved her for it. If it weren't for Rhonda's strength and her competence with the girls, he wouldn't be able to head for Florida. She could keep the family together until he caught on with a team.

Provided he could catch on with one.

And he could.

Without thinking, he'd driven to Sassafras County High School. Might as well go in and take some batting practice.

Slugger interrupted the quiet of Coach Sloan's study hall. "Hey, Coach," Buddy whispered from the door.

Coach Sloan looked at him like 'What the hell are you doing here? It's the middle of the school day,' but he motioned Slugger in. "What's wrong?"

"Nothin'. Just wanted to borrow your keys to the gym," Buddy said. "Gonna take a little batting practice." Sloan handed him the keys and ordered a couple of kids in the back of the room to be quiet.

Down at the gym, Slugger turned on the lights in the corner over the batting cage that he and Coach Sloan had built of two-by-sixes and white nylon netting. He was soothed by the gym's smell of sweat, leather, and rubber. With the gym quiet as a chapel, and with the rest of it in darkness, the batting cage at the far end looked like an altar.

Slugger took a bat from the cardboard barrel, examined it end

to end, shook it by the grip, then dropped it back into the barrel with a drum–like thud. Too bad he didn't have his bat. Then he checked another and another until he found a decent fit. When he took the hickory in his hands, it felt like an extension of his arms. A born hitter people had always said of him, a natural. And at twenty–nine, he'd gotten better.

He ducked into the batting cage and loaded a bag of balls into the Iron Mike and set it on high. The first ball rattled down into the pitching machine and the metal arm circled around and hurled the white sphere toward Slugger. "Crack," it shot off his bat into the nylon netting. It felt good to hit the ball. It felt right. He could imagine Jessie and Mel cheering for him. Then, between each pitch, Slugger imagined himself playing for a different major league team, and he mumbled the team name: "Cubs," crack, into the ivy at Wrigley Field. "Pirates," crack, grounded into the hole at Three Rivers. "Red Sox," crack, lined off the Green Monster. "Reds," crack into the upper deck at Riverfront. Slugger smacked each ball the shaky old Iron Mike could throw at him.

He picked up the balls scattered around the cage to reload the machine.

What if he couldn't make a team, even a Double–A club? What would everyone in Nema think? And all the guys he'd played with over the years? Everyone thought he could be one of the play–ers on TV. They all said so. Kids in Nema even took his name as often as big leaguers when playing sandlot games. But what did they know? None of them knew a major league player. People in town lamented how the fate of a fallen father, a weak mother, and a forced marriage had conspired to keep their star from shining before millions. Was it true? What if he went to spring training and proved them all wrong by failing to make a team? He'd never been cut. How could he come home and be who he was–the one who could have been.

Is that why he'd never tried before?

Before the machine hurled the next pitch Buddy Rogers stepped somewhat apart from himself and saw himself, a twenty-nine-year-old man in the corner of a high school gymnasium rapping baseballs thrown from an aging Iron Mike. A ball rattled down into place and the arm came around to deliver. The pitch curved toward him, he swung, and he missed it.

Twice Too Young

"No," the lovely, young woman whispered with weak conviction.

Linda held her 17–year–old daughter's hands across the corner of the marbleized Formica table, "Melanie," she said, "these days a girl doesn't have to go through with it. When it happened to me, I didn't know about such things, and it was illegal. But you're a smart girl. You could go to college, get out of here, become something."

"No," Melanie answered.

"Have you thought about life with John? He'll lose his Butler football scholarship and stay here. You know I love that boy, but men who end up here, often end up like your father."

"He was good enough for you."

Linda took a deep breath. "I made the best of the last 17 years with him and you kids. But, Melanie, honey, I had big dreams." Linda remembered how ashamed she had felt when she told the principal why she had to leave school. It was harder than telling her parents. He had put a large hand on her small shoulder when she began to cry, and said some child would be very lucky.

"But it's wrong," Melanie said.

"Is it right for a girl like you to be trapped in a town like this? Or a boy like John?" Linda asked. "Which is more wrong, Melanie June? Which is more wrong?" And when the 17–year–old girl lifted her face, she and Linda, both with oak–color hair and slate–blue eyes, looked more like sisters than mother and daughter with just 17 years between them. "If you love him, if you love yourself," Linda said, "give yourselves a chance to grow. There will be a time for this thing."

Linda remembered so well over a quiet moment the course of her days, and she wanted to shield Melanie from the oxymorons of her life: the crowded loneliness, the screaming silence, and the sullen joy. These Linda had known for half her 34–years but could not articulate.

"I'll finish high school," Melanie said, no doubt remembering her parents fighting over her mother wanting to attend night school to get her high school diploma. Her father had accused her mother of trying to prove she was better than he was.

"I'd like to see you finish college. You could be the first on either side of our family to graduate college," Linda said.

That thought hung between them for a moment, and then Linda told Melanie that ten years after she'd dropped out, when Tony had started trucking for McLean and all three kids were finally in school (Melanie in fifth grade, Mike in fourth, and Susie in first), Linda had made a trip to Bloomington. She'd planned to enroll in correspondence courses for her high school degree through the university. After signing up, she followed some students into an

ivy-covered limestone building, Woodburn Hall, and sat in the back of a theater-like classroom with about a hundred students. A small energetic man with gray curly hair talked about volcanoes. It was fascinating. So she bought the textbook, and every Tuesday and Thursday that semester, she went to his class. She read the books when Tony was on the road. After Geology, she'd sat in on Art History, then Political Science, Literature, Biology, and so on at the rate of one course per semester over the past seven years. While the rest of her life conspired to make her old, among the students she felt young. But at times she stopped and looked at them, realizing how much older she was now. One of her professors had been younger than she was, and she thought maybe it was time to stop sneaking into lectures, but she wondered what she would do with herself. Those classes had gotten her through the week, every school week for years.

Linda said she just knew Melanie would love college if she went.

The fragile conversation between mother and daughter shattered when Mike and a friend charged in through the kitchen door from playing basketball in the gravel driveway. Linda tried to send them out, but they wanted a drink. "Use the hose," she ordered, and Mike knew by Mom's voice and Melanie's downturned face not to argue. But he didn't display any worry either, and ran out the back door with his buddy.

"If you'd had the choice, Mom, would you have done it?"

"That's not what we're talking about."

"It's what I'm asking," Melanie said.

"Melanie, I love you. From the moment I saw you, you were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, and I never regretted a thing. But we're talking about you, Melanie June. There's a big world outside Nema, Indiana, a different world than I grew up in, and a bright girl like you can make it your own."

"It ain't right, Momma."

"No it isn't. Both are wrong," Linda said. "You have two bad

choices."

"Two wrongs don't make a right."

"Unless the second rights the first." Linda answered softly but firmly and stroked her daughter's hair. "This thing would change you and John forever. It would rob your youth. You'd have to scrape for everything. You'd be trapped. This thing would make you row far from the shore. I know, I've lived it before you," she said. "You have seen me live it."

"But John is different than Dad."

"Tony was a lot like John when he was 18. And John might end up a lot like Tony when he is 35. Unless, unless he gets an education and gets out of here." Linda pointed to the Lazy Boy in the living room. "Your father leaves his best self out on the road. When he's here, he's sitting in that recliner with a beer in one hand and the TV remote in the other, not talking unless he has to, and not looking away from the screen when he does talk, saving money for a bigger cable–TV package instead of a trip to Europe."

Melanie picked at the nail polish on her fingers, "What about me. If I stay, will I end up like you?"

"You might. Or like your father's sister, Beverly, whose dreams never reach far from their mobile home. But you don't want to live like either of us. You don't have to, Honey."

Melanie's hand rested on her jeans between her hip bones. Her hand slid down over the bump and four fingers held herself where it was soft. And she bent forward on the table resting her forehead on her other arm. When Linda's hand stroked the oak–colored hair again, Melanie began to weep.

Linda spoke softly because she could speak no other way with her throat so tight, "My sweet baby, sweet Melanie. There will be a time for this. But you can only be young and free once." She whispered as she rubbed her daughter's back and stroked her hair: "Fill your life with all the wonderful things." Linda felt her lovely girl nod under her hand. "My baby, my beautiful baby." Linda's

finger expertly lifted a tear from the corner of her own eye before it could roll onto her cheek. Before it could be called crying.

A Final Word

If you enjoyed the book, please share your opinion with friends on social media, and add your review on Amazon and GoodReads. These reviews can dramatically impact the success of small publishers and their authors.

You can learn more about John Young and send him your thoughts at: johnyoungwriter.com