

DOG BONE SOUP
A Boomer's Journey

Bette A. Stevens

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Historical/Literary Fiction/1950s & 60s/Coming of Age/Families & Communities/New England/Poverty/Prejudice/Bullying

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DESCRIPTON:

Boomers call them *The Good Old Days*—the 1950s and 60s, when America was flying high. An era when the *All American Family* lived a life filled with hopes and dreams come true.

Shawn Daniels isn't your typical American boomer boy. Shawn is a poor boy and his father is the town drunk. Shawn's family has no indoor plumbing or running water, but they do have a TV. After all, Dad deserves the rewards of his labor. Meanwhile, Shawn and his brother Willie keep the firewood cut and stacked, haul in water for cooking and cleaning and do all that needs to be done around the ramshackle place they call home. But when chores are done, these resourceful kids set out on boundless adventures that don't cost a dime.

On a bitter New England day in 1964, Shawn is on his way to boot camp to soak up the southern sun and strike out on a new adventure—in a place where he believes it's possible to make his dreams come true. Find out where this Boomer's been and where he's going in **DOG BONE SOUP**.

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Chapter 1

THE POSTCARD ARRIVED four days before my eighteenth birthday. All I had to do now was sign the final papers and light out for basic training. I could hardly wait to leave this place behind.

There were six of us ready to become soldiers. The other five guys were headed to Fort Dix. Soon as we were inducted, the sergeant who swore us in started calling us a bunch of lily-assed bastards and worse. When the jerk marched the other five guys off, I was happy as hell I wasn't one of them.

Lieutenant Richards called me into his office. "You'll be heading out tomorrow, Private Daniels. Here are your tickets."

We sat in his office and talked about my future with the U.S. Army. Then he handed me a schedule for the next day's journey and we went over every detail.

"Now let's get you home so you can get a good night's sleep before you fly off to serve Uncle Sam, soldier."

"Good luck Private," the lieutenant said when he dropped me off at the house. We saluted and I stood there watching until his car disappeared over the hill.

I'd always liked army people. They called me Mr. Daniels and even sir sometimes. Now I was officially a private in the U.S. Army and I was ready to start a new life. I pictured myself in an officer's uniform one day—a lieutenant, a captain, maybe even a general.

Mum and I didn't get much more than a few winks of sleep that night. I don't know how many pots of coffee she perked while we sat at the kitchen table and talked the hours away. Of course, it was Mum did most of the talking. Once she opened her picture books, I felt like I was drinking in the life I wanted to leave.

Mum took all of those pictures with her Brownie—that camera was her pride and joy. None of us kids was allowed to touch it unless she supervised a shot every now and then. If Dad wasn't around, it was me peeking through the lens. Mum was fussy about taking pictures just so.

Five books were piled on the table and we went through them one page at a time. Mum had a story for every snapshot. Some made me laugh so hard that I doubled over.

It was two minutes shy of three when she closed the last album.

“Thanks for staying up. I've got the alarm set for six and I know that won't give us much sleep.” Mum pulled out her hanky, sniffled and hugged me before we turned in. My leaving would to be hard on her.

Willie was snoring away, likely dreaming about cars. I slipped in next to him and pulled away some puffs and huddled under them.

The minute I closed my eyes I started dreaming about my new life. No more freezing to death up north. I was headed for southern sunshine and I saw myself soaking it all in.

Bzzzzzzz. I jumped out of bed, threw on my clothes, grabbed the suitcase and headed for the kitchen. Mum already had breakfast on the stove, so I ran outside to do my business and came back in to grab a hot biscuit and down it with a cup of steaming coffee.

I was half frozen and snow was whipping around me in circles when I headed out on the three-mile walk into town to catch the bus.

I shook flakes big as quarters from my jacket as I climbed the steps of the Greyhound. Two hours and I'd be boarding a plane headed to Fort Jackson. South Carolina was sure the place to be, especially in February.

"Claremont Municipal." The driver's call roused me from a great dream about riding on a jet and fishing down south.

I got off the bus, looked up and spotted a blue and white jet with the Pan Am globe on its tail fin coming in for a landing. It sure was a hell of a lot bigger than those Piper Cubs that Willie and I watched out at Edwards Field every Fourth of July.

I marched into the building trying to remember everything Lieutenant Richards told me. Go directly to the Pan Am check-in desk, get out my ticket, hand it to the clerk.

"How many bags, Mr. Daniels?" a man wearing a neat Pan Am jacket asked.

"Just this one," I told him as I lifted the brown leather suitcase that had belonged to Mum's dad.

"Keep your bag with you, son. You can store it in the overhead compartment. It's Gate Four. Flight 107. You'll be boarding in twenty minutes." The clerk stamped my ticket, and handed me the stub.

"How do I get to Gate Four?"

He gave me directions and I scrambled off. Feeling a little light headed, I told myself that any place I landed had to be better than Fort Dix, New Jersey.

By the time I reached the gate, folks were already waiting to board. I took my place in line and followed the crowd. We filed out over a

long wooden ramp and climbed a ladder that took us inside the plane.

I could feel the blood pulsing through my body when I stepped into the jet and looked around for my seat. Hell, I sure wished I'd passed that eye exam, so I could sit behind the controls of a plane like this someday. Here I was eighteen years old, been color-blind all my life and never knew it until I went through all that damned testing at the recruiting office. I never could follow a blood trail when I was out hunting with Dad. Never noticed the autumn-turned leaves that Mum raved on about every fall either. Blue had been my favorite color since I was a kid—it always stood out from the rest.

I shoved the case into the compartment like I saw a few other folks do and settled into a window seat.

A little shaver with hair as white as the snow that was falling when I boarded the bus back home hopped into the seat beside me. He was dressed in Sunday-go-to-meetin' clothes and it was only Tuesday. Looked to be three or four at the most. His folks sat across the aisle. Real professional. Likely his old man was a doctor or a lawyer. Rich folks, for sure.

Soon as we fastened our seat belts, the plane rolled down the runway and lifted us into the sky. I kept my eyes glued to what was going on below. It wasn't long before the ground looked like one of Mum's patchwork quilts. I wondered if the chicken hawks and eagles ever got high enough to see it like that. By the time the quilt disappeared, a lady came around with a cart filled with drinks. I got an Orange Crush and the little guy next to me got chocolate milk. I smiled at the kid and his eyes took on a sparkle. Then, we sat there sipping our drinks and staring straight ahead.

I turned to peek out the window. We must have been in the clouds; everything looked as white as the snow and the mountain tops back

home. Soon as I finished my soda and set the empty cup on the tray, I looked down at the kid who was still sipping on his chocolate milk.

That's when Mum's picture books popped into my head. I remembered a snapshot of me in a pin-striped suit that Dad took of us out at the logging camp and thought I sure looked a lot like the little guy beside me back then. I rolled my head back, yawned and stretched out as best I could, then closed my eyes, figuring I'd catch a catnap while we were up over the clouds.

I opened my eyes and closed them again. All I could see was Mum's picture books. Tried to shake the old logging camp and eighteen years of memories out of my head, but they wouldn't budge.

Still, I needed a nap and this was the perfect time to catch a few winks. Before I knew it, I was back in the kitchen, sitting with Mum and her picture books.



“That was Easter Sunday. You were four,” Mum smiled last night when she opened the first book. “We were living out at Hiram's lumber camp.”

I was all dressed up for church when she ran back into the house. By the time she came out with Willie on her hip, there I was, crawling through a mud puddle after a ball that had rolled under Dad's Plymouth.

Then Mum's smile left her face. “I sure wanted to cry that day. Dad never saw a need to buy special church clothes. He never saw a need for a lot of things,” she whispered and wiped her eyes with her hanky before she turned the page.

She pointed to another black and white photo. “That was the night when you peed in your father’s boot,” Mum winked at me and chuckled.

I remembered the old camp Dad built up on Uncle Hiram’s land. Eventually, he tore down the tar paper shack and I helped him haul the lumber over to Edden to build the house. The camp had a kitchen and a bedroom and two little windows.

At night I’d lie on my feather-tick mattress, all snuggled up with a pile of quilted puffs that Grammie had made from scraps Gramps brought home from the woolen mill. My eyes would follow the mice as they scampered back and forth across the rafters. Whenever we sang “Three Blind Mice,” I wished I could catch one of those little critters and keep it for a pet.

Some nights, if you looked up at the rafters just right, you could see the stars shining through the cracks. I liked wishing on the stars. Mum said if you wished on the first star you saw at night, your wish would come true. She told us it might take a while, but sooner or later it was bound to happen.

Dad didn’t believe in wishes. Whenever we’d wish for anything, he’d say, “If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.” Dad was the practical one. He was always saying things like never go out in the woods alone. He told us if you got off the twitching trail, you wouldn’t find another road for forty miles. Warned us that there were lots of bears around, too. I remember the time when one of them broke into Uncle Hiram’s pig pen and tore up the old sow. They nearly lost her.

There was a brook not far from the cabin. Dad crossed it most every day to cut logs. Sometimes he would take me down to the brook to watch him when he went fishing. It was my favorite place, until that day Mum got hurt.

I was sitting at the table writing my ABC's. Mum always had me writing something. She said that education was important. Told me that I was sure to be the smartest boy in my class by the time I got to kindergarten.

I peeked over at Willie sleeping on a blanket in the corner.

Mum smiled at me from the stove. "We'll be having hotcakes with maple syrup for breakfast tomorrow. You just keep working on your letters."

I was back to working on my letters and stopped to draw a picture of hotcakes at the top of the paper when BANG—something exploded. Mum was in a fit bawling and screaming at me. "Shawn, go find your father. GO! GO, SHAWN!"

I just sat there wondering what to do.

"Run, son! SCREAM—BLOODY MURDER. Go Get Dad. SCREAM it LOUD and don't stop screaming."

I ran out of the house screaming "bloody murder" at the top of my lungs. I ran and ran and kept screaming until I slid down the bank on the crusted snow and fell through the ice into the brook. I stood in the brook shouting and shaking 'til Dad came tearing through two tall pines at the edge of the path.

"Lucky for you I was on my way back from the woods, son." Dad yanked me out the brook and set me down on the icy path where I stood, barefooted and shivering.

"What in the hell are you doing out here without a jacket or boots screaming 'bloody murder'?" Before I had a chance to say a word, he picked me up, put his cap on my head and stuffed as much of me as he could inside his heavy wool jacket. He carried me home while I told him about Mum.

By the time we got to the cabin, Willie was on his feet thrashing around the room and screeching to beat the band. Dad picked him up and handed him to me. Then he bandaged Mum up and gave her a good bawling out.

“Henrietta, sometimes you’re about as stupid as a stick. Don’t you know that a canner with a lid on is for cannin’ stuff, not for boilin’ down maple sap? You got to leave the lid off for that.”

For a long time after that, Mum and Dad didn’t talk much unless it was about things they didn’t like. Mum didn’t like Uncle Hiram, said he was a bad influence. Dad didn’t like Mum calling him and his family “no damned good.” Mum cried a lot.

By summertime, baby Annie came along and Mum stayed at home with her most of the time.

Dad would take Willie and me down to the brook when he went fishing. He’d have his beer bottle in one hand and Willie hooked to his hip with the other. I was old enough not to need holding. I’d run ahead with Dad’s pole and find my favorite spot along the bank. I’d sit there, listening to the brook sing, looking up into those giant oaks and pines. On real nice days, the sun peeked through the branches and danced on the water. It was pretty much like being in church, only quieter.

Late that summer, Mum made me my own fishing pole out of a maple sapling so I could fish alongside of Dad. She even made me a fish hook out of a safety pin. I loved that little pole.

Dad taught me how to cast my line and how to find little flat stones and make them skip across the ripples in the brook. We’d always catch a mess of fish. Dad hooked them all together on a sharp stick and let me count them. Then we’d lug them home for Mum to fix. She’d roll them in cornmeal and fry them up nice and crispy. Trout were my favorite.

One Saturday we were out fishing when black and gray thunderheads rolled in. I ran ahead to tell Mum about all the fish we'd caught.

When I got to the cabin, I looked up and I spotted a shiny green car sitting out front. Dad called it a "damned Hudson Hornet."

"Mum, we got eleven trout and three wide-mouths," I hollered as I bolted barefooted through the cabin's open door.

Mum stood there sniffing with tears rolling down her cheeks. She hugged me so tight I could hear her heart beating through the brown plaid dress that was her favorite. It was store-bought and the one she always wore to church. She kissed the top of my head and told me that she had to go away for a while.

"Now Shawn, I want you to be a big, brave boy while I'm gone. You take good care of Willie. Do you hear?"

"Yes'um," I answered. She hugged me again and nuzzled another kiss on top of my head. I grabbed a hold of her legs. I didn't want her to go anywhere without me.

"Uncle Jack is going to bring Annie and me over to stay with Grammie in Maine. I'll be back to get you boys just as soon as I can," Mum whispered before she and Annie disappeared through the doorway.

"Just where do you think you're going?" Dad looked at Mum and hollered.

"And what in the hell are you doing here?" he screamed at Uncle Jack.

"We're leaving this Godforsaken place forever. Good riddance to you, Eddie Daniels."

I watched Uncle Jack get into that damned Hudson Hornet and leave with our Mum and Annie.

Dad just kept cussing as he sat on the pine stump out front of the camp. After a while, he took Willie and me inside before he sat down at the table and started bawling.

All I knew was I wanted Mum.

End of Chapter 1

Thank you for stopping by to read Chapter 1 of DOG BONE SOUP!

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