

HI MOM, DID  
YOU MISS ME?



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YOU MISS ME?

*Volume 2*

JOSEPH ROUSH



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Published by Redemption Press, PO Box 427, Enumclaw, WA 98022.

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ISBN 13: 978-1-63232-324-8

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2009910370

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# INTRODUCTION

VOLUME 1 OF *Hi, Mom. Did You Miss Me?* followed my life from early childhood when I lost my mom, and my sister, brother, and I were taken to the Montana State Children's Home to live with nearly four hundred other kids—through all the changes and living arrangements and visits with my dad I experienced until I went into the Army.

Volume 2 starts when I get married. Many of the people mentioned here in Volume 2 are individuals you will have met in Volume 1, and I'll try to clarify who everyone is again in this book.

Both volumes are based on journals I have written in through all these years as letters to my mom. I think you will agree that, while I've had many misfortunes and difficulties, God has always been faithful to take care of me and bless me beyond what I could have ever hoped for.



## PART ONE

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# LIFE WITH MY DIXIE DARLING

### NOVEMBER 6, 1952

THIS MORNING I woke up in the arms of the only girl I have truly loved. If today is the first day of the rest of my life, it is getting off to a great start, isn't it? Ike is our new president, and I am so contented. Yes, I can smell the honeysuckle, and I can hear the wind whispering through tall pines. Things I dreamed about while I was overseas are coming true for me. I am so fortunate. I've come a long way from the sad days at the Montana State Children's Home. I wish you could share in this happiness, Mom. My Odean (Lou) is so precious! You are going to love her. I just know it!

Today Odean and I found a two-room upstairs apartment on Church Street in Philadelphia, Mississippi. This will be our new home. The apartment is furnished, so we haven't had to buy furniture just yet. That, will come later when we get a larger place. One step at a time is the way to do it, don't you agree? Doing things together like this is great fun. We have so much to learn about married life. The whole thing is going to be a wonderful adventure. I hope I don't blow it!

### NOVEMBER 15, 1952

Mom, this day should go down in history as The Great Fudge Disaster. It started off innocently enough. Odean was showing me how

to make chocolate fudge one step at a time. “You stir it up just so,” she prompted, “and when you think it is just about right, you drop a small amount into some cool water. If it solidifies then it is done.”

“Looks simple to me,” I said as I stirred the gooey chocolate stuff. My confidence was surely misplaced because something went awfully wrong! My fudge got really, really hard. It was so hard that we could not get the spoon out of the chocolate-colored cement I had just created. Then we could not get the cement out of the bowl.

“Lord, Joseph, what have you done?” Odean asked, giggling. “We will have to throw the whole thing away, including my good mixing bowl! I think you had better leave the cooking to me from now on.”

Odean seems to think my lack of expertise in so many things is charming because I get some really nice hugs when something goes wrong like this. She is so patient and kind.

I can be really awkward about some things. For one thing, I am not a very accomplished lover. I think sex is a wonderful thing. Did you and Dad have to learn how to do this together? Were you experienced? Sometimes I am so awkward. But my Odean is so patient with me. Here again I think she finds my incompetence to be a little bit exciting. Learning things together is so great. I definitely found the right girl for me, didn't I?

## DECEMBER 25, 1952

This is my first Christmas in the South, and it certainly is different. Did you know that they shoot off fireworks at Christmas time? But some of the old traditions are the same all over our country.

We all met at Ma and Pa Chapman's place. Ma and Pa are Odean's grandparents. We always meet at Ma and Pa's. I believe that this will be the headquarters for the whole wonderful Spears/Chapman clan as long as Ma and Pa are still living. Family roots run deep here in Dixie. I don't think there is a wealthy person in the entire clan, but these folks have something money can't buy. They have a deep affection for one another. I think they love me already. I think I told you about the time I overheard Ma say how nice it was that Odean found such a “purty” boy. If the matriarch of the clan approves of me, then I must be okay.

We had drawn names. I think that is a fine idea. The presents were all stacked neatly beneath a cedar tree that Uncle Hardy cut from Marcus's pasture. I believe the tree had been selected sometime back in the fall before I had arrived home from Germany. I noticed a small cedar that had been marked by a knotted red bandana attached to a limb the first time I walked back to Marcus's farm pond.

When it came time to eat, we all stood in the living room as Hardy was about to say grace. I walked up behind Odean. I don't know exactly what came over me, but I got this strong urge to gently swat my bride's fanny. So I did just that. Horrors! The person who turned around with a delightful grin on her face was not Odean. It was my new sister-in-law, Helen. I have a feeling I will hear about this little misadventure for years to come.

Odean's folks all have a great sense of humor, so I'd better get ready for a lot of teasing. I think these folks get a lot of pleasure watching me stumble around. After all, I am a Yankee, so they have to give me a little slack, don't they?

### **JANUARY 13, 1953**

Mom, Odean is pregnant! We are going to have a baby! I just know that this time it is for real. We don't have time for such questions as, how are we ever going to be able to afford a baby? Shouldn't we have waited longer? How will we ever manage? We don't think like that. God has blessed us real good, and we will manage. How was it with you and Dad when you were pregnant with me? Were you as excited as Odean and I are? Was I planned? Or did I just happen?

Odean says we are going to have a boy. I sort of want a pretty little girl, but I know we will love our baby whether it is a boy or a girl. Life can be good, can't it?

Our doctor is a little Chinese fellow named Dr. Wong, and I know he is not "wong" about Odean's pregnancy because she is already having morning sickness. I should not joke about that, but I know Odean will get even with me. She always does.

You had three children, Billy, Sissy, and me. It must be really hard for you not knowing where your kids are and what has happened to them. I believe that you thought that when you gave us up for a little while

that you would be allowed to get us back some day. I think that Sissy is doing really well, but I don't know about Billy. Maybe I will find him someday too. Sissy is living and thriving at the Bierys'.

I have a job. It is my first civilian job since I got out of service. I am a delivery boy and stock boy at Underwood's Grocery in Philadelphia. "Is it a good job?" Odean asked me.

"I don't really know. What is a good job around these parts? It only pays sixty cents an hour," I replied.

"How many hours a week do you get, silly?"

"Sixty hours at sixty cents an hour."

"Then that's a good job. Sixty hours makes it a good job. Lots of guys would like that many hours."

Mom, can you believe it? They measure a job by how many hours a week you get. I never looked at it that way, did you? I told you things sure are different here in the deep South. Lots of "po folks" around here, but they sure do know how to live happy lives.

## **FEBRUARY 26, 1953**

Ever been to a baby shower? I found out the hard way that baby showers are just for women. Men had best stay away from baby showers unless they enjoy being embarrassed. Odean said I could tag along if I wanted to. So dumb me, I did just that. The shower was held at Pete and Laurice Cannon's place. I was relieved to see Pete sitting there when I walked in with Odean. At least I would not be the only man there.

Before long, the ladies were having a wonderful time making those cooing sounds women like to make when they see something they think is so, so darling. That wasn't too bad as Pete and I kept our distance while drinking coffee and playing cards out in the kitchen while the women did their thing in the living room.

It is unique how these women, all of whom were old friends, go about seeing to it that the baby shower will be a success. They have a tradition that whenever a baby grows out of a certain size diaper, blanket, or infant wear, the best ones are washed, ironed, and put away until the time another girlfriend has a baby shower. The best things are passed around from one household to another.

Odean got four dozen perfectly good diapers. One of the girls had a really nice baby bed, complete with springs and a mattress. Another had a good bassinet. When all the sharing and hugging was over, it was time for the women to begin telling all kinds of stories about love and marriage. Pete and I should have left right then, but we stuck around for a little while.

Things got pretty noisy and a little bit naughty in that tiny living room. I nodded to Pete and we slipped out the back door just in time to hear Odean's delightful voice begin to tell her thing. Like I said, Mom, baby showers are definitely not for men. It is good, though, that these women can have such a good time, don't you agree?

We won't have to buy a lot of things to get started with the rearing of our first son. Folks can surely be good to one another when they want to. I am blessed. Some Southern traditions are great!

### **MARCH 1, 1953**

Mom, today marks our first anniversary. It certainly is a different kind of day from the one back in Fort Belvoir when we tied the knot on March 1, 1952. Today it is seventy-five degrees with a clear blue sky. There is no snow today!

I rushed out to Odean's parents' house for my lunch break. Odean was there, working in the garden with her mother, Lilly. I watched, enthralled, as my pregnant wife cut garden greens for our supper. There was a certain glow about her that made her seem to be just about the prettiest woman I had ever seen. Of course she is having some problems with the morning sickness, and she has put on some weight. I had never seen her look prettier than this. I think I will remember this scene until the day I die. It was wonderful! I drove back to work whistling a country song. I am a very happy guy.

### **MARCH 3, 1953**

Today Odean and I moved into a duplex, which gives us more room than our apartment, and Odean will not have to climb stairs carrying what is probably going to be a really large baby. We will have to pay

thirty-five dollars a month, which is a little more than we paid for our two-room upstairs apartment on Church Street.

We scrubbed the floors and walls and bought cooking utensils at the local dime store. The place is partially furnished, so we did not have to buy furniture yet. One of these days we will have to get furniture of our own. It is still fun doing all these things together. Togetherness is a nice thing, don't you agree?

Tonight Odean and I went to the drive-in movies. It is good to go out like this with your best girl when your best girl is also your pregnant wife. Life is good! I think our baby is due to be born in late August or early September. Odean and I did not waste much time after I got home from the service, did we? How long were you and Dad married before I came along? Kind of nose-y, aren't I? You were young when I was born, weren't you?

### **MAY 10, 1953**

Today Odean and I drove our trusty old Plymouth over to Montgomery, Alabama, where Odean's brother and his wife, Sue, live while Granville is stationed in the Air Force. Sue and Granville Lee were married just three weeks after Odean and I were wed at Fort Belvoir. You can see that we two couples have much in common.

Odean had a little trouble enjoying the visit as she was still suffering from morning sickness. I hope she is just about over the morning sickness because it has been going on for quite a while now. I hear that some women suffer more from that than do others. She seems to be fine after 10:00 AM for the rest of the day. We are still learning about married life. We learn something new just about every day. I think that is one of the wonderful things about being married, don't you?

Odean's older brother, J. D. and his wife, Helen, had their first baby boy in December. We should have our first in late August or early September. I wonder if Sue and Granville Lee will have a baby soon after ours. It would be kind of nice if things worked out that way. That way Marcus and Lilly Spears would be blessed with three grandchildren in less than one year. I think Marcus and Lilly will be excellent grandparents. I just thought of something! You are going to be a grandma soon!

On the way back home from Montgomery, the fan belt broke on our car. Fortunately, it happened just a half mile from a gas station. I got a new belt and ran back to the car to put it on so we could resume our journey home. It was so hot, and I was frightened that the heat would hurt Odean or the baby. Everything turned out okay.

I suddenly realized that as husband and father-to-be, I have more responsibilities to think about. I pray that somehow God will see to it that I am always capable enough to care for my family the way a good husband and father should. I'm trying, Mom. I'm trying. Sometimes I am a little frightened about my new responsibilities.

### **JUNE 6, 1953**

I took a picture of Odean out in the sweet corn patch gathering vegetables. I sure hope this picture turns out, as she was wearing a maternity smock that looked like a small tent hanging from her shoulders. I think it will give us a lot of good chuckles in years to come. If this picture does turn out well, I will keep it and treasure it always. There may come a day when these old photos will be like tiny treasures to us.

I found an old photo you took of Sissy and me when I was only three years old and Sissy was a baby. I was pushing my little sister in a homemade cart. Did Dad make that cart for us? You had written on the back side that this was Sonny pushing Sissy in the cart. My hair was very light blonde then. Is that why you called me Sonny? Whatever the reason, I still remember that name, Sonny. Nobody calls me that anymore. Tell me, if we do not find each other until we get to heaven, will you call me Sonny then?

I think our baby is weighing really heavy on Odean right now, but she does not complain. I worry some about the heat too, but that does not seem to bother her either. She is a wonder, this wife of mine.

### **JUNE 20, 1953**

Did I tell you that my father-in-law, Marcus, has a very nice three-acre pond? It is great fun catching big blue gills and white perch (crappies) out of that pond. He must have a million fish in his pond. My mother-in-law, Lilly, dearly loves to fish. I think her first love is

gardening, and her second love is fishing. Bugs, snakes, insects, and heat do not seem to bother Lilly when the fish are biting.

I think these folks believe I am all right. I'm lucky that way. Besides, their daughter loves me, so they had best get used to having me around. Life is easy for me right now. I expect things will change when our baby arrives.

Marcus is trying to make a farmer out of me. I'd go for the idea if these folks had farm machinery. They do the farming around these red clay hills with horses and mules. I have bought a cow and two calves. Maybe this is the beginning of something, but I do not feel very confident about working with horses and mules. I will give it a try for a while. I am familiar with tractors, not horses.

Odean's Uncle Hardy Lundy's dad is named Enoch. I bought a cute little Jersey calf from him, so naturally I named the calf Enoch. Enoch is a bull. Mr. Enoch Lundy's wife is named Anne, so naturally we call the couple Mr. Enoch and Mrs. Anne. What a delightful couple they are! I just love the folks here in Dixie. They are so hospitable and polite. I am picking up lots of Southern terms. Before long, I will sound like a real Southerner.

I must tell you about Mrs. Anne and Mr. Enoch. Anne is a stocky, round-faced lady with lots of freckles. Enoch is a tall, thin "drink of water." He loves to tell stories, and Mrs. Anne must love to cook, because each time we stop in to see them, Odean and I are persuaded to eat something Mrs. Anne has just finished cooking. So we leave there with a full stomach and a hearty, "Y'all come back now."

I think my Odean knows every farmer in this part of the county, and we often stop in for short visits with these folks, and each time we get the same "Y'all come back" treatment. It is a different kind of life here in rural Mississippi. Nobody is in a hurry, and everyone finds time to say, "Howdy." I hope the day never comes when we have to leave here.

My lovely wife seems to get great enjoyment from introducing me to all her distant cousins and the many friends she knows from her growing-up years in the red clay portion of eastern Mississippi. Sometimes I feel like I am a trophy on display, but I soon grow to love these farmers and woodsmen and their delightfully polite wives and

children. I am beginning to talk just like them. I think I am developing a Southern drawl. In other words, I am beginning to fit in.

### **SEPTEMBER 3, 1953 (ANOTHER RED LETTER DAY)**

Mom, this has been a hectic, almost frantic last twenty-four hours. We have a new baby! Charles William Roush was born (finally) at 8:15 AM. It took six hours of really intense labor for Odean to deliver a wonderfully healthy, big baby boy. Chuck weighed in at ten pounds even, and he was two weeks overdue.

Last night Odean and I had gone to see a movie at the drive-in theater just like any other night. She said she felt fine, and I dearly love drive-in movies. We got home just past midnight, and we went straight to bed. Our little suitcase has been packed for over a month now. Shortly after 1:00 AM Odean awakened me. "Joe," she said in her most urgent-sounding voice. "It is time to go. I am contracting, and the pains are not all that far apart."

Was I ever excited! Little did I know how long the labor would be and how much pain my beautiful wife would have to endure. When Dr. Wong finally got there, it was not long before a nurse came running out of the delivery room with a bundle in her arms. "It's a boy," she exclaimed, "and it is a big one! A ten pounder!"

Odean is a slender, tall woman. It must have been quite an ordeal for a slim lady to have such a big baby. Mom, I pray that giving me such a fine, big son did not seriously injure Odean. I was your firstborn. Did I injure you when I was born?

I've had a lot of good things happen to me since I graduated from high school, haven't I? I worked my way up to sergeant in the Army, met and married a beautiful girl from Mississippi, and now I have a son. Life is great, isn't it? What does it feel like to be a grandmother? You and I will have a lot of catching up to do one of these days.

### **NOVEMBER 5, 1953**

This has been an anniversary of sorts. One year ago today I got my discharge from the Army and headed to the waiting arms of Odean. Our military service resulted in some nice things for Odean and me.

We are both taking college courses at night and are getting paid to do it. Remember how I decided that I would like to work with kids when I got out of the service? The American literature class Odean and I are taking together is the first class on my way toward getting a teaching degree.

It soon became quite obvious to me that most of the guys attending classes were there for the money. I found myself answering most of the professor's questions since nobody else seemed interested enough to study their lessons. I have always loved literature, and I was on my way to an "A" in this course. We read about men like Steinbeck and Hemingway, and we read classics like *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Killers*.

Professor Sollie was also an ordained minister, and he was embarrassed by some of the language used by the characters in the novels we read. Odean assured him that she understood these words just fine. I think Sollie was so much of a gentleman that he did not want to offend my beautiful wife. Very considerate of him, wasn't it?

### NOVEMBER 14, 1953

It is amazing to me how warm it is in Mississippi this time of year. When I lived in Indiana or Michigan, I'd have seen snow by this time. Today I took a picture of our son, Chuck. We had placed him on a blanket in Marcus's front yard. The sun was very bright, and Chuck did not like it at all. He wasn't crying as I took that picture, but I could tell he was not happy to be out there on his grandfather's lawn. I think he felt deserted since he was not in his mother's arms. He loves to be held, especially by his mother. I sort of like to be held in those arms myself. In her arms is a very good place to be.

Lately I have been wondering about you and Dad. I know that you loved each other. How was it possible that you two sometimes had such terrible fights? I could never fight with my Odean. How could I ever bring myself to hit her like Dad hit you?

### NOVEMBER 23, 1953

Wonder of wonders! Today Odean and I received a really nice card and letter from Dad. I sure was not expecting that. Apparently Dad contacted Odean's uncle, Madison Spears, who just happened

to be Neshoba County sheriff. I guess that somehow Grandma Roush contacted Dad. She was always able to get in touch with him whenever something big happened to one of his children. I'd say the birth of our first child was something big, wouldn't you? You know, Mom, if you would contact Grandma, I'd bet she could find a way to get us all back together. I know that sometimes certain things are just not meant to be, but that does not mean we need to give up, does it? I think Dad is really pleased to be a grandfather. When my son is old enough to understand, I will tell him about his grandfather, the cowboy, who was not allowed to raise his children because some judge told him he could not. I have a feeling that Dad is a lonely, sorrowful old man. It is kind of sad to think about his life. When I think of Dad, I recall the lonely field hands from the Steinbeck novel, *Of Mice and Men*.

I have married into an old Southern family with deep roots. I hope the fact that I have been such a "rolling stone" does not cause Odean to come to grief someday. I feel so blessed to have found such a family as hers.

## **FEBRUARY 10, 1954**

Today is Odean's birthday, and I think I gave her a really nice present. I'll have to share our conversations with you so you can understand what an outstanding day this turned out to be. It went something like this:

As I walked into the kitchen, I sang out, "Hi, Mommy, how's the birthday girl?"

"The birthday girl is tired, Daddy. Chuck messed up a whole dozen diapers, and he's been cross as a bear."

"Diarrhea?"

"He's teething."

My son looked up at me with a "Who are you?" smirk on his face.

"Well, Honey," I said to Odean, "I think I have some really good news. You know Mr. Hutchinson, who has a shop right next door to Underwood's grocery store?"

"Yes, I do. What about him?"

"You know that little white house he has just below the hill on the outskirts of town? Well, he wants to rent it to us for just eight dollars a month. Imagine that!"

“How can he do such a thing?”

“He wants someone to live in it so it won’t stand empty. I think he wants you to be that someone.”

Folks around here dearly love my Odean. I can see why. The fact that they love her means they tolerate me.

“What a nice little old man he is!” Odean said. “He’s lived alone for years since his wife passed away. I think he has been very lonely. Joe, this is such good news. We were behind with some bills, and now I think we can get along on your salary okay.”

I told you, Mom, that I had a nice present for my Odean. A house we can afford is a grand present. Life is good. God is great! He is good to provide us with nice persons like lonely old Mr. Hutchinson.

### **MARCH 1, 1954**

This is our second anniversary. We celebrated by staying home and acting like newlyweds. It is too soon for us to have another baby and if Odean has to suffer each time we bring a new baby into the world, I wonder if we should have more children. I think my lovely wife will have the final say on that decision, don’t you?

Though the weather has been cold and windy, I planted some green beans called Kentucky Wonders in the backyard. I think my attempts to be a Southern farmer have failed, but I can still have a little garden. Odean’s mother, Lilly, always has a huge garden, and I imagine that this year we will help her plant, weed, pick, and can all kinds of vegetables from her garden. I can see us now, sitting on the front porch, snapping green beans and hulling lima beans. That is a Southern tradition. Even visitors join in the fun when it is time to harvest peas and beans. It is sort of relaxing, sitting around snapping beans, telling tales, and drinking iced tea. As I’ve said before, life in Dixie sure is different from the frantic pace one often finds in the North.

I took a picture of Odean and Chuck today out on the front porch of our little white house. She was holding him upright, and he was pointing up to heaven as if to say, “See there, God, I’m going to be walking soon.” I think this picture will be one of life’s little treasures to look at and remember someday when I am old. Odean is so pretty. I know I

will treasure this picture all the days of my life. I think we take some of God's gifts for granted. We accept them without even a "Thank you." I'm guilty of that. I know I am. I wonder what my Aunt Amelia and Uncle Gus would think about my little family. Would they love Odean? Would they like my son? Would they approve of my new lifestyle?

### **JULY 18, 1954**

We traded for a newer car last week. It is a Dodge sedan. It has more room, and it is much easier to drive than a normal stick shift. Our old Plymouth is now owned by a young fellow who proudly displays a squirrel's tail from the car's antenna.

It is nearly three weeks before I am to begin classes at Meridian Junior College in Meridian, Mississippi. We will soon have to leave our cute little white house so we can live, attend school, and work in Meridian. Odean is going to attend college with me, so we will have to hire a babysitter. Being a parent entails a lot of decisions, doesn't it?

### **AUGUST 13, 1954**

Things certainly do happen fast sometimes! We have moved into a duplex on Twenty-Eighth Avenue in Meridian. We have purchased our first furniture ever, a bedroom set, an old clanky-sounding refrigerator, a couch and chair for the living room, and a dinette set. The bedroom set cost a hundred and twenty-five dollars; the couch and chair \$75, and the refrigerator \$25 at the Salvation Army. They threw in the dinette for free since we were setting up housekeeping in their city. Folks sure are nice to Odean and me.

Odean and I are already signed up for classes at the college. Our landlady, Mrs. Pugh, is going to be our babysitter. She is only going to charge us twenty dollars a week, and Chuck will not to be transported to a strange place every day while we are attending classes. We only have to walk across the front porch to deliver our son to the babysitter. How lucky can we get? I think when folks meet my Odean, they just naturally fall in love with her sweet disposition, and I am the beneficiary of their good will. We are blessed, aren't we?

**AUGUST 14, 1954**

The local A&P store is only three blocks from our house, and they have promised to hire me as a stock boy when school begins in the fall. With the GI bill and a part-time job in the grocery store, we should have enough money to keep us going just fine. Life is good! God is great!

**AUGUST 15, 1954**

Today Odean, Chuck, and I started out on an eleven-hundred-mile trip to visit Aunt Amelia and Uncle Gus in St. Helen, Michigan. I wanted to show off my wife and baby to them. "You don't think our Dodge is going to use twelve quarts of oil like our old Plymouth did, do you?" Odean asked, giggling.

"You would remember that! I don't think we will have any trouble with our Dodge. It is a good car."

"I hope your aunt and uncle will like me," Odean said, worried.

"They'll love you. Why wouldn't they?"

I didn't tell Odean right away that we would be stopping at Stockwell, Indiana, to see the Leamons and Grandma Roush. I knew for certain that all these folks would just love my Southern lady. I felt so excited about this trip. Odean had showed me off like a golden trophy to all her folks. Now it was my time for that. Wouldn't it be great if I could introduce you to my wife? Someday I will do that. I know I will. Then I will be with the two most important females in my life. I am still the great dreamer, but I know that sometimes dreams really do come true.

We have mapped out our route. It will be quite simple. We will leave Meridian, heading north on US 45. US 45 will take us all the way north to southern Illinois. We will cross over into Indiana near Terre Haute. We will then take US 43 north all the way to near Lafayette, Indiana, where we will take Indiana 28 over to Stockwell. Stockwell is the place where I graduated from high school and spent nearly three good years with Margaret and Jimmy Leamon. It is where so many of the Roush cousins grew up in the parsonage. It is the home of giant oaks in the old church grove. There are a lot of memories to share with my lovely Odean.

After spending two days in Stockwell, we will head on to Michigan. We'll take Indiana 25 north to Peru, Indiana, where we will turn onto US 31, which will take us north to Manistee, Michigan. Then we will turn East on M 55, which will take us all the way to St. Helen. This will be quite a trip. I hope it turns out just the way we've planned it. So far, most of our plans seem to work out just about the way we want them to. Michigan is much cooler this time of year than Mississippi. Right now it is cloudy and damp. I want the sun to shine so Odean can appreciate the beauty of the northern forests.

### **AUGUST 17, 1954**

We have finally arrived in the tiny village of St. Helen, Michigan, and much of the place seems very familiar to me and largely unchanged. The Cedar Inn and Log Cabin bars still seem to be to be the center of the village. Uncle Louis Meyers's gas company is still the biggest business in town. The post office has been moved from the north end to the center of the village near Uncle Louis's home. I wonder if Louis still owns the Log Cabin bar. I knew Amelia and Gus would fall in love with Odean and Chuck. I was very proud to present my new family to them. Chuck thinks Uncle Gus is special. As far as I know, Uncle Gus has no enemies in the whole wide world. He is such a gentle person.

We will be staying with Uncle Gus and Amelia in my old upstairs bedroom. This attic room does not bother Odean at all. After all, her parents' house is just a four-room, tin-roofed house built by Marcus's own hands. I hope this weather clears up soon. It is downright chilly! I don't want Odean to get the wrong idea about Michigan. It is not always like this. Mom, our little son, Chuck, is a wonderful traveler. He hardly complained about anything at all on the entire trip up here.

### **AUGUST 25, 1954**

Mom, would you believe it! We had clouds and rain up here in Michigan for the entire week. Odean, Chuck, and I did get to do a few nice things, but the rain put a damper on my plans to show off what was once my home state. We enjoyed ourselves at Hartwick Pines, went north to the Ausable River where giant trout are supposed to abide, and

we fed the deer at the Ogemaw Game refuge. Everyone feeds the deer out there. Chuck thought it was just wonderful that the deer would eat out of his hands. We also drove down two-track roads deep into the forest where I had roamed as a young boy.

### **AUGUST 26, 1954**

We are on our way back home now. Tonight we will visit Grandma and Margaret and Jimmy Leamon once again. That way we will not have to pay for a motel. I think Margaret and Jimmy are very “taken” with Odean. I know she relates to them just fine. They are her kind of people. We will probably stay tonight with Margaret and Jimmy in their guest bedroom. In a way, our Chuck is the Leamons’ first grandson and Grandma Roush’s first great-grandson. I know there was nothing official about my relationship with the Leamons, but Chuck calls them Granddad and Grandma. He understands a lot for one so small.

We will probably drive all the way home from Stockwell to Meridian tomorrow as our funds are limited, and we need to get back because school for Odean and me starts in less than two weeks. I am looking forward to getting back into the classroom. There has always been something magical about schools, and teachers, and books, and chalkboards. I know that I will someday be a schoolteacher. I am dedicated to that idea. “Odean,” I said, “What do you think of my folks?”

“I love them all, but Margaret and Jimmy are my favorites, followed by Gus. I’m not really sure about Amelia, though,” she answered. Nobody is sure about Amelia.

### **SEPTEMBER 8, 1954**

We are back in Meridian, Mississippi, and Odean and I are ready for junior college. I was able to transfer in several credits from night classes I had taken at Philadelphia since those courses were approved by Mississippi Southern, which is affiliated with Meridian Junior College. This means that I should earn my Associate’s degree in Education by June 1, 1955.

**SEPTEMBER 10, 1954**

Things are looking up for us. I will be a stock boy at the local A&P grocery store. We are going to get along just fine, Mom. Life is pretty wonderful. I do wish you could be here to see your grandson grow. Chuck is a really nice-looking baby boy and he gets along with just about everyone. Dad was outgoing like that, wasn't he?

Junior college in the South is really quaint. The top two grades of high school are combined with the first two years of college, so Meridian Junior College consists of grades 11, 12, 13, and 14. That way really gifted high school students can be taking college courses in language, sociology, math, and more. Odean and I have several high school students in some of our classes. I think this is going to be a very good year for Odean, Chuck, and me.

My duties at the A&P are pretty simple. I help unload trucks, put up fresh canned goods after rotating older stock forward, and help folks carry out sacks of groceries to their cars. Thank goodness, I do not have to deliver groceries to private homes. I was not good as a delivery boy. I only have to work four hours a day, and I have Sundays off. Since Philadelphia is only forty miles away, I know we will go home to visit everyone at Ma and Pa's often. I just love Odean's family. I think we are going to the drive-in movies Saturday night. Life here in Mississippi is not all work and no play. Odean and I have lots of fun together. In that way we are still a couple of teenagers. I sometimes wonder about life when we grow older. Will we still have fun together? Will simple things like a drive in the country and drive-in movies still appeal to us? Will we be as deeply in love as we are now?

**SEPTEMBER 29, 1954**

Mrs. Pugh looked after Chuck for us so we could attend the football game between Meridian and Pontotoc. Since the upper two classes are not allowed to play, our team was a high school team. Academics are stressed for the upper two grades over physical education. We had a good time cheering for our team, which lost in the last minute twenty-four to twenty-one. It was a fun night. You might recall that back in Stockwell

we did not have a high school football team. Baseball and basketball were our pride and joy back then.

### **OCTOBER 1, 1954**

Mom, you would enjoy meeting some of my teachers here. We have small classes, and all the teachers seem to know us well. I think my favorite is Miss Maude. She is at least sixty years old and has faded red hair and a temper to match. Her subject is world literature, and her textbook is the library. She stands about four foot ten, and she can put the fear of God right into you if you don't do things right. I get along with her just fine because I pay attention, and I remember Aunt Amelia. Amelia and Miss Maude must be made of the same stuff.

Did I tell you that each night Odean and I fall asleep to the musical clackety-clack of the motor that runs our antique refrigerator? It is noisy, but it works really well. I wonder if years from now we will recall the sound of that old refrigerator. Mom, I am happy, Odean is happy, and Chuck is happy. We are living the good life, but we sure aren't rich in material things. It takes the funds from the GI bill and my little job at the A&P to make ends meet, but we are wealthy in the things that really count. I have married into an old-style Southern family, and I seem to fit in very well.

### **OCTOBER 9, 1954**

It is my birthday again and, as you know, I am twenty-four years old. Did I tell you that Odean's sister, Bobbie Nell, and I have birthdays just a few days apart? This gives us an excuse to celebrate together at Ma and Pa Chapman's place. It is really fun to get together at the old folks' place. You can just feel the love and genuine happiness out here on the red clay roads of eastern Mississippi. Bobbie Nell is almost an exact opposite of my Odean. While Odean is gentle and cautious, Bobbie Nell is adventurous and very loud. She is very giving, just like her older sister, but there the similarity seems to end. Anyone can see that the two sisters care a lot for each other.

This was a fine sunny day, and after the meal, all the men except Pa posed for a picture on the front lawn. Pa does not like his picture

being taken. I was proudly holding Chuck in my arms. In the picture were Uncle Hardy, Uncle Algie, Junior Spears, Granville Lee, and me. I think Chuck got in on this picture because he is such a ham. He always wants to get his picture taken. He wants to be the center of attention a lot of the time. Was I like that when I was a little tyke?

### NOVEMBER 23, 1954

Mom, did you know that all over the South the folks who live on small farms do their butchering of hogs at Thanksgiving time? We all get together wearing our oldest clothing, we kill the hogs, hang them up after dipping them into boiling hot water to get all the hair off their carcasses, and then we proceed to cut up the carcasses into hams, shoulders, fat backs, pigs' feet, loins, and other cuts. Much of the fat is cut into little strips and then tossed into a big black kettle. After pouring off the hot liquid, what remains is called cracklings. Cracklings are delicious. I think I ate too many of these cracklings today. Hope I don't get sick!

Tomorrow the women will fix a really big Thanksgiving dinner while Hardy and I go quail hunting. I won't kill any of the birds, but it is a real pleasure to watch the hunting dogs work, and it doesn't bother me to see someone else shoot birds. I just can't do it myself. I don't think I will ever become a hunter. Do you? The folks down here do not watch football on Thanksgiving like so many of my relatives in Indiana and Michigan do. Of course we will all gather at Ma and Pa's place where we'll partake of turkey, three kinds of dressing, including oyster and cornbread, yams, potatoes and gravy, biscuits and molasses, and cranberry salad.

We have three great cooks in the crowd: Ma Chapman, Lilly Spears, and my Odean. They represent three generations of this big family. I know that someday this family will begin to decline, but right now it is rich in tradition and family ties are strong. My Odean has strong family roots. She is exactly what the Lord decided I must have to be happy. Years ago my old Sunday school teacher was right when she told me that I would always have someone special looking out for me. I keep returning again and again to that wonderful picture of Jesus surrounded by sheep, and I feel like the lamb he is supporting in his arms. I know

that I am blessed. So when Uncle Hardy speaks our Thanksgiving prayer tomorrow, you know what I am thankful for. I am thankful for much more than most folks. You think I have forgotten you, don't you? That is not so. We'll meet again. I don't know how or where, but you'll hold me again, and I'll feel the security of a mother's love. Have a great day, Mom. I know I will.

### **DECEMBER 24, 1954**

Hello again, Mom. This will be my third Christmas with the folks here in Mississippi. I guess you could say that Odean and I have already had our Christmas since we turned in our old Dodge for a newer 1951 Dodge Wayfarer. It is a bigger, newer car, and it has fluid drive, which means I don't have to use a clutch to change gears all the time. We feel pretty special driving this newer, bigger car down the rutted red clay roads to Ma and Pa's place. Tomorrow is Christmas day, and we'll all meet at Ma and Pa Chapman's once more. We all feel a little sad because Ma has been sick most of this fall and winter, and we are afraid that this great woman may not be with us much longer.

### **DECEMBER 25, 1954**

We had our usual nice Christmas meal, and then we sat around the tree as Pa acted as Santa Claus, passing out all the presents. Soon we had a house full of happy relatives "ooohing and aaahing" over nice gifts. We also had a house full of torn up wrapping paper. Soon Uncle Hardy supervised the bagging up of trash. I wondered if a good bonfire would be the solution to the mess.

Marcus and Junior had both been hitting the bottle. I have discovered that this is sort of a Christmas tradition in this part of Mississippi. The illegal whiskey around these parts is called "poot head." I never did figure out why it was called that. Shortly after the present exchange, a series of firecrackers was lit, and it became very noisy around the old place. I think that Ma and Pa put up with this because they didn't want to offend anybody. They were, as always, the perfect hosts.

I could see that Odean was very much like her grandmother. Both are gentle souls who always have a kind word for everyone, and both are

very protective of their families. I have learned to love Ma, and I know she likes me. What a nice old lady she is.

### **JANUARY 23, 1955**

Hi, Mom. Odean and I are back in school at Meridian Junior College. In June I will have an Associate's degree. Maybe then I will go on to Mississippi Southern University to get my Bachelor's degree in education. Remember when I was coming back across the Atlantic Ocean from Germany and I decided that I wanted to work with young people and be an elementary schoolteacher? These days that is my dream. Gone are my visions of becoming a big league baseball player. Gone are my aspirations to work as a sports reporter for a major newspaper like the *Detroit Free Press*. I am determined to become a schoolteacher. I know that it will take me a long time to get all my college courses done since I am already the proud parent of a young son. I think my very pretty young wife will help me realize my dream. She has faith in me.

### **FEBRUARY 6, 1955**

Marcus and I went fishing at the Legion Pond today. It was a clear, cold morning, and we had to scrape frost from the seats in the boat before we could launch out into the lake. We had a fine time catching our limit of big crappies. Down here they call crappies white perch. We use small minnows. My father-in-law dearly loves to catch white perch. I guess you could call this spending quality time with your father-in-law. I found myself sharing Vienna sausages and "poot head" with Marcus. Of course I don't drink much of that stuff because it is very strong, and you know I can't do much drinking. I think Dad passed a weakness on to me. It wouldn't take much to make me tipsy, but I always manage to stop before it goes too far. I guess that is one thing Dad did not manage very well, and it caused him a lot of grief, didn't it?

### **MARCH 1, 1955**

This is our third anniversary. We spent the day at the old home place with Ma and Pa and several of the cousins. We had a happy time, but

we are concerned about Ma. She is suffering from heart problems, and she has to take medicines. This does not sit well with her.

“Sech foolishness,” she protested. “I never did believe in pills and doctors before now, and I don’t trust in them all that much. I’ll be fine just as soon as we can get to gardening again. Ain’t that right, Pa?”

The more I am around Ma, the more I can see her resemblance with my Odean. Ma is a right attractive older woman and Odean is very pretty. They both have hazel eyes and there is a hint of red in their light brown hair. Also, they both have a row of freckles running across the bridge of their noses. Odean looks more like Ma than she does her own mother, Lilly. Lilly is such a thin little lady. I guess I have learned to love all the women in this extended family. I seem to have outlived the trauma of what Emma Gertz did to my psyche when she brutalized Sissy back in 1942. I trust women more now than I did back then.

### **APRIL 2, 1955**

I got a letter today from Aunt Amelia. She had heard that I was studying toward becoming a schoolteacher. She said there would be openings for two teachers at St. Helen and would I be interested. Perhaps I could get an emergency permit to teach in Michigan. Of course, I was excited about the possibilities. It would mean that I would have to leave Mississippi. Would Odean be willing to leave her wonderful family for my sake? What to do? What to do? Odean and I would have to think this over very carefully. I have a feeling that she will go along with any plan I come up with. What would you do, Mom? I will only have an Associate’s degree at the end of the school term this year. This would be a really big move for us, wouldn’t it? Maybe it won’t work out.

### **APRIL 28, 1955**

I have written letters to Emma T. Wiseman, the school superintendent in Roscommon County, Michigan. Amelia had done some inquiring for me, and it looks like Odean and I will make the trip to St. Helen to accept the teaching job there. I should be scared about this, but I’m not. Things seem to work out for me.

**MAY 6, 1955**

We had a big gathering at Ma and Pa's today. It seems that all of the cousins decided that since the weather was so nice this would be a good time to honor Ma. Everybody dearly loves this old lady. Each spring we go to the park in Meridian to honor Pa on his birthday, but this day was especially for Ma. It was late in the afternoon as Odean and I were preparing to leave for Meridian that I heard Ma exclaim, "Joe's going to leave us, and he's not coming back." I should have spoken up right then, but I didn't. Of course I'll be coming back with my family to visit all these good folks every chance I get. I love this family as much as my wife does. There was something in Ma's voice that sounded almost like a sob. I'll be back, Ma. You'll see.

On the way home to Meridian, Odean spoke up, "Ma sure does hate to see us go."

"You're right, Sweetheart. Are you sure we want to do this?"

"It's your dream. Wherever you go, I'll go. You know that." I stopped the car on the shoulder of Highway 19 long enough to gather my true love into my arms. I had learned long ago not to kiss while the car was in motion. Oh, Mom, I do love this woman! This is sort of like the story of Ruth and Naomi in the Bible. "Wherever thou goest, I will go."

**MAY 25, 1955**

School is out. I have an Associate's degree, and we are looking forward to a big move in early August to Michigan, where I plan to begin my teaching career. Another change in my life is about to occur. Actually, all these changes now are *our* changes. I hope I am doing the right thing for my little family. I'm sure Odean's folks are a little worried about us, but somehow I know things will turn out okay. I hope they don't resent me for taking their Odean so far away. Most of her folks have never been out of the state of Mississippi. Her roots run deep in the red soil of Mississippi, while I have meandered like a tumbleweed across Montana, Indiana, Michigan, and Mississippi.

**JULY 18, 1955**

I haven't felt like this since the day back in Twin Bridges when I realized I would not be allowed to come back home to you in Deerlodge. The sadness I feel is so deep that I actually hurt physically. Ma Chapman died suddenly. None of us was prepared for this, though we all knew that Ma had been ailing for several months. Poor Algie! Algie is Odean's youngest uncle. He came over right after supper. "I got a phone call from Mary," he said. "Ma's in the hospital, not doing well at all. We had best head up the road tonight." So we loaded up in Algie's black Dodge sedan for the forty-mile trip up to Philadelphia. Odean, Chuck, and I sat in the back seat while Algie and Hazel occupied the front seat.

Highway 19 between Meridian and Philadelphia passes through pine woods. The roadway is curvy and hilly, and it seemed that the trip was slower than usual. I tried to keep the conversation flowing on gentle, happy themes. Algie must have been speeding because state police stopped us not far from Philadelphia on Highway 19. When Algie informed the trooper that Ma Chapman was in the hospital, we were waved on with a friendly reminder that we should try to get to the hospital as visitors rather than as accident victims.

When we arrived at the hospital, we rushed in and made our way to the second floor where we expected to find Ma. The room was empty, the mattress on the bed had been rolled up, and the floors had been scrubbed. Algie let out a soft moan, and we all realized that Ma was no longer with us. We would find her at McClain Hays Funeral Home. Mom, have you ever been to an old-fashioned wake? This was a brand new experience for me. McClain Hays Funeral Home was a two-story brick house with perhaps fifteen rooms. Ma and Pa Chapman had so many friends throughout Neshoba County that their friends and kinfolk filled up every room in the place. I had met a whole passel of these folks and they were all eager to tell tales of the Chapman clan. I was a good listener so I learned a lot of history tonight.

Some of the womenfolk stayed with Ma's body during the night, which is a tradition where a corpse should not be left unattended even for a few minutes. The wake was not a sad time. The time for tears would be during the funeral to be held at Sandtown Baptist Church the day after tomorrow. Today was a time for remembering Ma Chapman. I

had been picked to be one of Ma's pall bearers. This would be another new experience for me. I would miss this grand old lady terribly. I had no idea how I would perform this chore.

## **JULY 20, 1955**

The road from Philadelphia to Sandtown wound like some gigantic, lazy serpent through pine woods and pasture lands, past tin-roofed cottages and brick homes with pickup trucks in driveways and hounds lolling around in backyards. The funeral procession must have stretched for more than two miles over that winding country road. Along the way, folks pulled their cars and pickups to the shoulders of the road. They exited their vehicles and stood in somber attention as the hearse drove past. Most of the men doffed their hats as a symbol of respect. Some traditions in the old South die hard. Maybe they will never pass from my memory. My education is an ongoing thing, isn't it, Mom?

I think Ma's funeral was a fine celebration. There was good music, fine preaching, and some heartfelt eulogies. We pall bearers sat in the front pew just left of Ma's casket. We were all young. Ma was our grandmother. Grandmothers can be very special. Ma certainly was. When the family passed by the open casket for the final goodbye, Pa, who has palsy, shook so much that we thought he would fall. I felt a knot tighten up in my throat as the old man said farewell to the love of his life.

We had to carry the casket uphill from the church, and we grandsons were so distraught that I feared we would drop Ma before we got to her final resting place. Our hearts were broken. Tears flowed down my face. I could hardly see. Your heart really does hurt when it is broken like this, isn't that so? After the graveside service, Odean led me to the gravesite of a distant cousin of hers. This man had once been on the FBI's most wanted list because he had robbed banks during the Great Depression. A local Robin Hood type of hero, he had been hunted down and shot full of holes by federal agents shortly after he had killed a Meridian policeman. I get history lessons down here constantly. I really regret the passing of Ma Chapman for I fear this is the beginning of the decline of a really strong family. This family was more like a clan. It was made up of aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, second cousins, and

in-laws. The glue that held all this together was Ma and Pa Chapman. They were loved by all the members of the clan. I knew my life would change after today.

Odean, Chuck, and I would be leaving for Michigan in a few days. I had an almost overwhelming feeling that Ma had decided to pass from this life as a polite convenience to us so we would not have to return suddenly from far off to attend her funeral. Doors close and others open again and again in our lives. Has Dad ever found you? Is he still looking? I am. I wonder when that door will open for me.