

SUMMER OF '58

Summer of '58
Copyright © 2015 by Janice Gilbertson

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner, including electronic storage and retrieval systems, except by explicit written permission from the publisher. Brief passages excerpted for review purposes are excepted.

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-1-942428-11-4

Cover artwork:

© Tressiedavis | Dreamstime.com - Wistful Little Girl In Cowboy Hat Photo
© Alanpoulson | Dreamstime.com - Silhouette man holding a saddle by side

Cover and interior design by Kelsey Rice

SUMMER OF '58

JANICE GILBERTSON



Pen-L Publishing
Fayetteville, Arkansas
Pen-L.com

CHAPTER ONE

At twenty minutes until six on the first Friday morning of June, Angela Garrett sat on the edge of the chair nearest the front door, waiting. Two cars had passed by on the street in front of the wood frame house with the big porch, and both times Angela had shot up from her perch with the flutter of a nervous bird. She tilted her head toward the screen door and listened as their engine noise faded away to silence and then sat back down again. He had promised her he would be there by six.

“You be ready, now. This big old car won’t wait.” He had flashed his boyish grin and gently shaken her shoulder when he warned her, but she knew he meant what he said.

Odd, then, that as she waited she would be so filled with the anticipation of what was to come when she had no realistic notions of what that might be. Being so unworldly, so naive about what kinds of places and types of people existed beyond the countryside that bound her small hometown, did not keep Angela’s heart from hammering inside her chest. When a girl is just twelve and has known only the beauty of the land and the kindness of nearly every human who has touched her life, why would she, or could she, think it to be different anywhere else?

Her mother’s shabby suitcase, packed tight with jeans, shirts, and every undergarment and pair of socks without holes she could scrape

up, sat out on the porch. Next to it, a cardboard carton printed with the words “CONTENTS: ONE DOZEN TOILET TISSUE” in blue letters on all four sides held a few comic books, a pink plastic container with some personal items she had snatched up, including the tube of Revlon Rosebud lipstick from her mother’s dresser, her warm coat, and then her pillow stuffed on top. From her place in the living room, Angela could hear her mother moving about in the kitchen—the thunk of cupboard doors, the clink of the coffee canister lid, and the slipping-slide and metallic rattle of the silverware drawer. She knew the routine by the sounds, but she tried to ignore them so she could concentrate on the arrival of Lanny Ray’s big car. The squeak of the faucet handle and the wet, hollow sound of water filling the metal coffeepot annoyed her for a moment, and then she felt guilty—and sad. She and her mother had hardly spoken since Arlene had come out of her room and discovered Angela already up and dressed.

“Well, you’re looking ready to go this morning, sweetie,” Arlene had said, trying to keep the glumness out of her voice. She had smiled a nice smile at Angela, but her eyes were red rimmed and puffy, and they didn’t smile with her mouth. She had nearly made herself crazy during the night, second-guessing her rash decision to let Angela go away with her father. It was too long. She should have spoken up, said to him, “No, it’s just too long.” But she hadn’t, and now it was too late. It wouldn’t be fair to her daughter to change her mind now, and it was only she who mattered.

Angela watched the clock on the wall tick the minutes away, counting the seconds of them inside her head. Ten minutes until . . . five minutes until . . . and at six o’clock exactly, she heard his car pull up. Her stomach quivered, and her mind played a startling trick on her—maybe she shouldn’t go with him after all. She didn’t want to hurt her mother’s feelings, and she knew her mom was worried. So worried. But then, there he came, clomping up the porch steps and peeking through the screen door like a boy coming to play.

"Hey, kid!" his voice filled up the living room. "You ready? Where's your ma?"

"I'm right here, Lanny Ray. You don't need to wake the whole neighborhood."

"This here's all you got, Ang? This ain't much for a long trip." He saw the questioning look on Angela's face and quickly shrugged his own comment away. "Ah, don't matter. We have to do our washin' along the way, anyhow." He picked up Angela's suitcase and the box and headed out to the car, carrying them effortlessly, as if they weighed nothing. Angela followed, and Arlene came behind, tightening the belt of her robe and twisting the soft sash in her fingers. Lanny Ray unlocked the vast cave of a trunk and put Angela's things beside his own large suitcase, his chaps neatly laid on top, and, back in the corner, his saddle bronc rig.

Suddenly, Arlene felt as though she had so much to say to her girl. Too much. Words came spewing out.

"Call me. Promise. Anytime. Well, not midday but, you know, after work. After five. Unless, of course, it's an emergency, then call anytime, okay? Promise me."

"I promise." Angela tried to look past her mother's face so she wouldn't see the concern.

"And try to eat decent, and go easy on sodas and junk. And I want that head of hair washed. It's so pretty when it's nice and clean." She ran her fingers through the dark, soft curls. "Don't let it get oily. Brush your teeth twice a day, same as you do here at home. Oh, Ang, what have I done?" Her face crumpled, and her fingers fluttered around her mouth, and Angela thought her mom was going to cry hard.

"Arlene, she'll be fine. She will. I'll take good care of her." Lanny Ray headed around to the driver's side of his Olds.

"Wait! Just one minute. Don't go. I'll be right back." Arlene ran up the steps, slippers slapping at her heels, letting the screen slam behind her. Angela glanced at her father and stood there, feeling awkward. Arlene came hurrying back with a bundle in her arms and thrust it at

Angela. “Here, hon. Take this with you. Your great-grandma gave it to me, and she’d be tickled for you to have it along while you’re travelin’. I just know she would.”

“Come on, Ang. Get in here so we can get goin’.” He sat behind the wheel and leaned across the wide seat so he could see his ex-wife and daughter try for another hug with the quilt between them.

It was exquisite, the quilt. All put together with tiny hand stitches, as fine and perfect as any could be. The fabric, mostly floral, showed soft little flowers in blues and purples and gold. It felt cool and as smooth as silk where it lay against Angela’s bare arms. Tears came to her eyes, and as soon as she put her face into the quilt to hide them from her mother, she smelled the pure cedar scent of the chest it had been stored in.

Angela turned away to open the back door, and she laid the quilt gently on the seat before swinging the door closed. She used both hands to tug the heavy front car door open and slid onto the seat.

“I’ll be fine, and I’ll call all the time. Don’t worry.” With those words, she pulled the big door closed with a thud. Lanny Ray stepped on the gas and waved a hand without looking back, and Angela watched her mother grow smaller in the rearview mirror.

At the corner, Lanny Ray made a left-hand turn toward Main Street. The big car swooped smooth as a breeze onto River Street and glided to a stop at Main. Angela’s insides went giddy when she looked down Main Street. Everything—absolutely everything—about this morning had strangeness to it. Main Street was near empty and, in the faint light of dawn, had the eerie feel of a ghost town. One lonely car sat at the curb in front of the Blue Moon Café. In the opposite direction, the Burger Palace appeared dark and gloomy, and the faded pink milkshake glass, cut from plywood, looked tacky atop the building. The froth of the whipped cream painted on the picture, dirty-white and peeling, had a cherry on top that was so faded, without its red neon light one would hardly notice it. The big car with its hydroglide steering and suspension floated them past the Blue Moon, where Angela could see

the warm lights glowing inside and the empty counter and booths. The sign on the door said "Open."

When they drove past the Five and Dime Store, Angela felt a lump form in her throat. The store had been her mother's place of work for the past few years, and it seemed odd to Angela that Arlene would be going there, just as she always did, on this morning. She had a vague feeling everything here in Jewel should stop and wait for her while she was away.

Angela felt relieved to see that the two old men who sat daily on the bench in front of the Mercantile weren't there at this hour. They would know soon enough that she had left town with her father, and they would spread the news like hawkers. Then, just before the big car rolled out of town past the city limit sign, they passed Jake's Place. The old bar looked shabby without the colorful beer signs and the one light over the door. Angela looked away so an old impression wouldn't linger on her mind.

Neither she nor Lanny Ray spoke for a long time. She'd watched the edge of town roll by in the morning dimness, but soon clean, clear light pushed up from behind the mountains in the east, and long shadows threw themselves across the narrow, paved road in front of the fence posts and telephone poles. The two-lane road ran for miles through the pastures and barbed wire fences stretching into the distance.

Lanny Ray rolled his window down a few inches and let the breeze flutter in, and they breathed in the perfume of morning. Angela stole sneaky glances at her father and came to the conclusion he looked happy enough about having her along. He caught her in a glance and smiled kindly.

"We'll stop for breakfast in a couple of hours. A place I always stop. They have pretty good food there. Maybe you can get ya some hotcakes."

"Okay," Angela said.

"Warm enough, are ya?" Lanny asked her.

"I'm okay," she said when, actually, she was a bit chilly. She'd rather die there in the car's seat than complain about something so trivial.

“Boy, I hope you don’t talk this much the whole time we’re gone.” He flashed her a smile.

Angela relaxed, leaning her head back and watching the green pastures dotted with cattle and hay fields go by. She hoped her mother wouldn’t stay too sad about her leaving. They had never been apart like this before. In fact, Angela had not left Jewel since she’d been too young to remember. Her parents had divorced the year she turned eight, and, eventually, Arlene had gone to work to make ends meet. Lanny Ray’s life revolved around the rodeo circuit, which ran through the summer months, and he worked on local ranches the rest of the year. If he rode his broncs and made some good money, he gave plenty to Arlene, but winning a lot of money wasn’t something to be counted on. They never had extra money for travel vacations, and Arlene couldn’t miss work.

Angela never felt as if she were missing out on anything by not going away somewhere. She knew most of her schoolmates took vacations to faraway places like California or over into Arizona. One family had driven all the way to New York when their kids were only ten and twelve years old. But that had been back before Angela knew anything about New York.

Angela didn’t realize she had dozed until Lanny Ray steered the car off the pavement, and the rattle of gravel under the car startled her awake. She looked to see if he noticed her sleeping, but he didn’t let on. Lanny pulled into a line of cars on the side of a ramshackle building with broad windows displaying neon beer signs, shut the engine off, and stretched his arms up with a soft groan. They left the car and made their way around to the front where a flyspecked sign beckoned them—“Do come in. We’re always open.” Lanny told Angela where the restrooms were on the back of the building and said he would go on in and get them a place to sit.

Angela smelled the oily odor of diesel and exhaust and felt the rumble of the engines from the trucks out in the big lot. Once she finished in the restroom, she walked back around the building and stepped inside where the odors of coffee and fried bacon greeted her.

She saw her father sitting at the horseshoe-shaped counter, talking with the waitress. They were laughing about something when Angela slipped into the chair next to Lanny Ray's. She saw the waitress give Lanny a big wink with heavy black eyelashes before moving off to refill coffee mugs. They both decided on what to eat and were ready to order when she came back.

"Who's this little gal ya got with ya, Lanny Ray? She sure must be related to you. She's got those big, beautiful brown eyes of yours." She flashed a big smile full of pretty white teeth.

"Mickey," Lanny Ray said, "This here is my daughter, Angela. Ang, this is Mickey. She's been a friend of mine for quite a long time."

"Hello," Angela said in the polite manner she been taught to use. She thought Mickey looked pretty in a way. Her makeup was heavy, and her brown eyes had a thick, black line drawn around them. Her lips wore a heavy coat of pale-pink lipstick. She wore her platinum hair pulled into a neat French roll. Angela thought she looked like a movie star.

Mickey only glanced at Angela. "Friend? I guess you could say that, Lanny Ray. Close friends, I would say." And she winked at him again. An awkward moment of silence hung in the air until Lanny told Angela to go ahead and order her breakfast. He did the same while Mickey scribbled on her ticket book and, with a toss of her head, left to turn their order in to the cook.

Angela sat quietly and looked around the room. The dingy walls were yellowed with nicotine and cooking grease. A sign above the cook's window said "Western Omelets, \$1.99" in loopy handwriting. What caught Angela's eye was the jukebox over in one corner. She asked Lanny if she could go look at the songs. He fished a dime out of his pocket and gave it to her. She ran a finger up and down the lists of song titles, recognizing most of them. They were all country songs, her favorite. She finally pushed F1 and waited until the record dropped onto the turntable. "How Much Is That Doggie in the Window" played.

As Angela returned to her seat, Mickey hovered over her father again and spoke to him in a soft voice. Their intimacy made Angela feel uncomfortable. She was relieved when she and Lanny Ray finished eating and went to the register to pay. Angela stepped out of the door, but through the plate glass window, she saw Mickey reach out to hold Lanny Ray's hand. They were saying something to each other with their faces close. Lanny turned to leave, and Mickey stood still and watched him go. Angela pretended she didn't see.

Back in the car, Lanny Ray said, "That Mickey, she's a real nice gal. I think you would like her a lot if you got to know her."

"She likes you a lot, doesn't she?" Angela said. She wondered if she sounded snippy, one of her mother's words.

"Oh, she's just a friendly gal, that's all. She likes to talk and kid around with her customers."

After a pause, Angela said, "She wasn't talking to any of her other customers much. I can tell she likes you." There was no fooling Angela.

Lanny Ray said no more about it, but Angela wondered if Mickey might be one of the women Lanny Ray had been rumored to be seeing.

Angela had seen and heard a lot of strife between her parents over the years, and she had an awareness of adult emotions most girls her age wouldn't possess—one more thing setting her apart from the other kids at school and making her feel different from them. Sometimes they seemed so much younger than she was.

During the entire first day on the road, Angela's emotions rose and fell with the passing scenery. She was both frightened about leaving Jewel and thrilled to be going with her father, and these two things kept her thoughts reeling for a time. When they pulled into a gas station, Lanny Ray bought them cold sodas out of a Coca-Cola case while the attendant checked under the hood and made small talk. Lanny went inside to pay for the gas, and he came back with an atlas and handed it to Angela.

"Now you can follow along on these maps and know right where we are. We have a long way to go. If I make the whole loop, we will be

in six, seven states. You'll see how it turns out to be a big ol' lopsided circle with twists and turns in it. Some of it's real pretty country, Ang. Some of it's boring as heck and scorching hot, but the best is in the mountains. It's always better in the mountains. We'll have us a real nice time. You'll see."

Angela opened her atlas, flipped the pages to New Mexico, and put her finger on the road leading out of Jewel.

"We sure haven't gone very far, have we?"

"Nope. Sure haven't." He reached to open the book to the front where the United States map stretched across two pages. "Look here. This here is the way we'll be headed." He traced a path with his finger. "When we get up here to Cheyenne," he tapped the town with enthusiasm, "we'll head back south over this-a-way."

Angela looked at him carefully, trying to determine whether he might be teasing her.

"Really?" She doubted if what he'd said could be true. "Isn't that an awful long ways?"

"It is, for sure. Turn back to the New Mexico map and aim for Amarillo, Texas. You can follow along for the whole trip that way."

After they were back on the road, Lanny Ray said, "I guess I should tell you some about how this rodeo trip works. You know what I do and all, the bronc ridin', I mean. But this sure ain't a normal trip. Tonight we'll find us a motel up the road here. I usually stop at the same ol' places. But some nights, I don't even get a motel. It's costly, and I can get some sleep right here in the car. If I ride somewhere late in the afternoon, it's easier to pile in here, put my feet up, and take a little nap. Then I can drive the rest of the night to the next rodeo town. That's about the only way I can get around the circuit and hit all the places I need to get to. There's a few places that leave more time in between, and then we can get our washin' done and get a nicer place to stay. Get all scrubbed up again." Lanny Ray laughed a little.

"Is that how all the cowboys do it?" she asked.

"Yep. Most do. And the more you want to ride, the harder you try to get down the road." Angela could hear the excitement in his voice as he talked about it.

"Now, if there's anything you need, anything at all, you be sure to speak up. And if at any time—don't matter when—you get tired, you just crawl right back there," he motioned over his shoulder to the wide backseat with his thumb, "with your mama's quilt, and you'll sleep like a baby."

"Okay." Angela was nodding to show her understanding.

"Just don't talk so dang much." Lanny Ray flashed his smile.

"I am kind of hungry." She smiled back.

"Well, you're in luck," Lanny Ray said as they pulled into the parking lot of another café that looked much the same as the one where they'd had breakfast. When they went inside, the place smelled about the same, too, except maybe more like hamburgers than bacon. This time they sat in a red leather booth, and Lanny Ray didn't seem to recognize the waitress. They ate hamburgers and then wedges of thick, sweet apple pie, and Lanny Ray talked with knowledge and building excitement about rodeos and riding and how the money gets paid out. Angela listened intently and asked him a few questions.

"How many riders are there?" she wanted to know.

"Well, it depends," Lanny said. "Sometimes there are maybe twenty or more at the bigger rodeos. If that happens, they divide us up and run two separate bronc ridin's.

"Rodeo producers are in the business to make money, too, so they have to be sure the crowds get the entertainment they come for. If they have enough contestants, they can split up the rough stock ridin'."

"How do you know which horse to ride? Do you get to pick your own?"

Lanny Ray smiled at this. "I wish we could," he said. "No, we draw for the horses, so we never know till then what one we'll get."

"Well, then, I hope you get nice ones."

"Don't hope such a thing, Ang. We don't want any nice ones. We want the best darn buckner there is. If we have a good ride on a real good buckin' horse, then we get a higher score."

"And when you get a higher score, you win more money, right?" She was getting it then.

"Right," Lanny said.

Angela relaxed more and, for a bit of time, forgot to wonder or worry how her mother was doing at home. She flipped through the choices of songs on the jukebox player at their table, and she sang the first few lines of the songs under her breath. She saw how Lanny Ray smiled at her, and she suddenly felt shy about her singing. The thought had crossed her mind more than a few times that she should grow up to be a country singer. She surely loved those songs. She didn't mention her idea to her father right then for fear he would laugh at her.

Over pie, Lanny told her about some of the friends he'd made and always looked forward to seeing at the rodeos. He said once in a while some of them had their kids with them, too. Or at least part of the time. He said casually that maybe she could make some new friends on the trip. He knew what a loner his daughter could be.

His idea didn't sound appealing to Angela. She didn't make new friends easily. It was so hard to talk to them about much of anything meaningful. It wasn't because of shyness really, not anymore. She was keen on keeping to herself.

After they left the café, they didn't drive far at all before Lanny Ray turned into a motel parking lot under a sign that said "Dew Stop Inn" in neon lights. Another brightly lit sign declared "Vacancy." Lanny left the car to go inside the tiny lobby to pay for a room. Angela had never stayed in a motel before. She found the cramped room to be stuffy and dim, even when all the lamps were on. There were two beds with a night table in between. The bathroom was so small a person could hardly turn around. The mirror on the wall had corroded around the edges where the finish had eroded with years of steamy moisture, and it made Angela's face look dark and wavy.

With no fuss, she and her father reached an agreement on how they would do things so they could each have their privacy. Angela took her turn in the bathroom first. She tried to hurry, just to please her father, but she couldn't make the faucets work right for a good hot shower, and she thought there might only be cold water. While she stood beneath the spray, though, the chill made her wince, and she refused to believe there could be no hot water. She fiddled with the handle some more until she finally felt some warmth from the high showerhead. Angela hoped to goodness that showers weren't always going to be so difficult. Finally clean and in her pajamas, she came out of the bathroom and climbed into her bed. She thought about her mother being home all alone and turned to the wall, concentrating on trying not to cry. She fell sound asleep before Lanny Ray finished his turn in the bathroom and turned out the lamp.