



The Boogie Man of Anadar

Summer of '60

Luther Megs, a familiar figure in Anadar, slowly lumbered along beside the curb of Main Street, probably headed for home. Luther's eyes stared blankly at the ground, shoulders slumped forward, and the ever-present burlap potato sack hung heavily over one shoulder. He wore the same thing everyday, summer or winter: blue Dickie work pants, long-sleeved shirts, a sweat-stained khaki cap always pulled low over his eyes, and heavy work boots that were once black, but now scuffed light brown from years and miles of toil. Occasionally, a farmer would stop to give him a ride as he ambled along the roadside, but other than that, most of the townspeople stayed clear of him. It was as though they didn't want to acknowledge he existed. He was an embarrassment.

There were many things that intrigued me about Luther Megs. He was the ultimate man of mystery in Anadar, even more so than Ott Smith. His chilling presence spooked not only the kids, but even adults avoided any physical or eye contact with him if they passed him on the sidewalks downtown or on the street. Somewhere along the way, Luther was dubbed the "Boogieman of Anadar".

Big Mommie and Poppy seemed to know a lot about him, but they were reluctant to share any history about him when I asked. Being ten-years-old, I figured it was time to solve this mystery and get down to the facts. If anybody would know, it'd be Poppy, but when I asked him about Luther, all

he said was, "You just leave Luther alone now, Benny. He's a good man and I don't want you bothering him. People misunderstand him, and he just needs to be left alone, you hear me?" He instructed sternly. Most of the time, if he was in a sharing mood, and I asked Poppy about somebody in town, he'd be brutally honest with his renditions of character. There were no gray lines with Poppy.

Now if Big Mommie thought he was giving out too much information though, she'd immediately reprimand him, "Now Louis, you don't know that, and don't go telling that story at the domino hall either!" She might as well have been talking to a wooden post. He knew when it was time to make an exit and usually disappeared outside to take care of some imaginary chore while she was still talking. "Louis! Do you hear me?" She'd call after him in exasperation, as he casually escaped through the rear screen door.

I decided to prod some more and make my case. "I'm not gonna bother him. I just want to know more about him, that's all. He walks around town with that burlap sack slung over his shoulder, nobody knows what's in it, never talks to anybody, and he's just creepy. Some of the boys I know make fun of him when they see him walking around town." I knew that was a mistake the second the words left my lips.

Poppy's eyebrow squenched together making his forehead wrinkle up and he gave me *the look*, which I knew meant instant disapproval. "Not me!" I said quickly, holding up my hands. "I feel sorry for him. I'll say hello and he doesn't even act like I'm there."

Poppy's shoulders and face relaxed, indicating no harm done. "Luther doesn't have a lot to say to people anymore, Benny. He talks only when he's got something to say. More people should try it. He just wants to be left alone." His eyes dropped down to the *Anadar Beacon* to catch up on the weekly news, so I knew Poppy was done and the conversation was over.

I grabbed my Yankees baseball cap off the peg on the wall and started for the door. "See ya later," I called back on my way to the door.

“Where are you going?” Poppy asked. That struck me as strange; he never asked me where I was going before. He always left that to Big Mommie.

“I’m going to Opal and Delbert’s. I haven’t seen them in a couple of days,” I answered back, still on the move. I didn’t want to elaborate any more than I had to.

“Be back for lunch, Benny,” Big Mommie instructed to my back. “I’ve got some work for you to do, after we eat.”

The word *work* stopped me in my tracks. This bit of new and unexpected information put an immediate knot in my stomach. *Work*. That could mean any number of things. Like hoeing weeds in the alley that had trunks on them as big as oak trees, or cleaning out the flower beds, which meant being eaten alive by the thorny rose bushes everywhere and more weeds, or even worse --- I could end up burning, then emptying that God-awful, smelly 55 gallon trash barrel in the alley. None of which made me look forward to lunch.

I squenched *my* eyebrows together this time. “What do I have to do?” I asked apprehensively, holding open the screen door to increase my odds of a speedy escape.

“You don’t worry about that now, just be back for lunch,” she stated matter-of-factly. She did that on purpose, making me wonder what torturous labor she had planned. She knew it’d ruin my morning, then gave me that quick little grin that made me nervous. She was a devious old girl. Well, I left on that cheery note and decided to go dig up some gossip on Luther from Opal and Delbert, my dad’s folks. I doubted they’d have anything good because they didn’t really get into the small town gossip thing, but it was an excellent excuse to get out of the house.

It was great having all four grandparents in the same small town; each pair was as different as day and night. Opal and Delbert were the ones I stayed with if I had some late-night adventure planned with the boys. Opal’s life revolved around her children and grandchildren, and she thought it was her job to wait on us hand and foot --- and best of all for us grandkids --- no curfews when we stayed over. She’d fixed me anything I wanted to eat, and I could eat peanut butter and jelly

sandwiches with a cold coke and a Hershey bar for dessert while watching cartoons in the middle of den, on the carpet I might add, if I wanted to. She'd even miss her own soap operas so I could watch Popeye.

Now Big Mommie, on the other hand, she imposed a 10:00 P. M. curfew and sliding in at 10:01 meant a switch would be appropriated from the weeping willow tree in the front yard the next morning. Heck of a way to start the day. I'm thinking she must've had radar like a bat or something. Even on the nights when I crawled through the bedroom window, it being past the witching hour, and me thinking I'd dodged detection, I'd be confronted at breakfast the next morning about my late comings. That tree was beginning to thin out a little too quick for my taste this summer. Also, where what I wanted to eat and when I wanted to eat was the norm at Opal's, there was no such thing at Big Mommie's. Meals were ready and on the table at the same time every day. Usually consisting of something along the line of turnip-greens, black-eyed peas, which I got to shell at nighttime watching *The Lawrence Welk Show*, corn on the cob, cornbread, and mystery meats such as meatloaf. Eaten in the kitchen, of course. Never on the carpet. And nothing got in the way of Big Mommie and Poppy when it came to watching *their* favorite soap operas, *As the World Turns* and *The Edge of Night*, during the lunch hour. Poppy was a retired farmer, but continued to work hard and keep himself busy at the domino hall. I was never sure how working hard and playing dominoes went together, but evidently it did.

Delbert worked his own small farm sunup to sundown because he had to, but he treasured his time around the house and being with Opal most of all. He did the neat things with us grandkids. Some things even forbidden, like driving and smoking. He'd take us out onto dusty farm tracks that bordered the cotton fields and tried to teach us to drive in a straight line, hoping we wouldn't wipe out his cotton crop for the year. Sometimes, when a group of us grandkids were all together, one of us would get to drive and other would be in the bed of the truck bouncing around like crazy. This was

entertainment to Delbert; however, he was a bit short-tempered at times, but then who wouldn't be trying to teach a ten-year-old how to drive.

One day I told him I wanted a corncob pipe like the one Popeye the Sailor kept propped in his mouth all the time. I didn't really expect him to do it, but that very afternoon I got to watch him carve up an old, dried out corncob, hollow out a stem, and then he broke apart one of his Chesterfield Kings, packed the tobacco in the corncob bowl, lighted it, took a couple of puffs to get it started, and then presented me with a perfect duplicate of Popeye's famous pipe. The spiraling smoke was an inviting sin. I knew Big Mommie would throw a fit if she had any knowledge of what I was about to do. I didn't care. Opportunities like this don't always pop up for young boys who are forced to go to church every Sunday and eat meatloaf. I took my new treasure from Delbert's hand, stuck the freshly carved wooden stem in my mouth, and sucked in ... hard. Well, a more comical coughing spell has never yet to be seen by mankind since that day. I coughed and spit and coughed and gagged, until my eyes watered up like a punctured firehose. It was *great!* Through blurry, burning eyes, I saw Delbert laughing to no end; it was one of the few times I'd ever seen him actually belly-laugh. He almost fell backwards from his easy chair, holding his sides, and trying to keep a straight face at the same time.

"Just practice some more --- you'll be fine," he laughed. At the time, I didn't realize how deadly that advice was. Opal continued cooking fried chicken and homemade French fries in the kitchen and pretended to ignore the shenanigans going on in the other room. As long as everyone was happy, she was fine with it. Many a time after that, Delbert and I would have a smoke together sitting on top of the storm cellar. Sin under supervision.

With the threat of chores behind me temporarily, I struck out, contemplating which route to take to Opal and Delbert's. There were two: one by way of the public pool by Donnie's house or down by the First Baptist Church, which was across the street from Luther's place. I decided to take the church route and do some investigating. It was always kind of funny that on Sunday mornings, all the church-goers milled about out front of the sanctuary, dressed up in their Sunday best, kids

running around playing tag, women wearing pillbox hats and passing along the latest gossip, and the men pulling the last drafts of smoke from their cigars before entering the church and listening to Brother Joe in the pulpit. And there across the street, sitting just as pretty as you please was Luther ... on his front porch, thick fingers wrapped around the long neck of a bottle of Jack Daniels bourbon, knocking back long swallows of brown liquor. It was a Sunday ritual for Luther. I think the men wished they were on the porch with him. The women thought it was sinful and was cause for the Baptist Church to be the laughing stock of the whole town. There was always this Baptist versus Methodist thing going on. There were more Baptist in town, but the Methodist didn't have Luther Megs living across from them drinking whiskey every Sunday morning. It was probably the only satisfying moment in Luther's life each week.

In contrast to the cathedral-like First Baptist Church, Luther's house looked like a large, gray stucco box; the faded print curtains hung from dingy windows like moss from a tree. There was no lush, green lawn trimmed with sharp cuts and angles to match his neighbors, just a healthy crop of weeds and scattered patches of packed, brown dirt. All I knew about it was that his parents died, and he never moved out of their house. What was a grown man living with parents for anyway? Us kids always suspected that he killed off his folks and buried the bodies in the yard somewhere. That's why he couldn't grow anything except a healthy patch of weeds on his property.

Cautiously, I coasted my bike downhill, keeping a constant eye on Luther's house up ahead to my left. And there he was, sitting on his porch, staring at his feet with a large bladed hoe resting on his shoulder. I wondered who he was going to kill today. I directed my eyes straight ahead, pretending I didn't see him. I didn't want him to know I was checking him out. I pedaled faster, picking up speed and turned a sharp, almost out of control left around the corner to Seventh Street, and on to Opal's, not slowing down till I was a full two blocks out of sight from Luther's place.

Upon arrival at Opal and Delbert's, I discovered that he was out at the farm, checking on the crops, and as usual, Opal sat in her chair watching soap operas and crocheting another afghan, about

her hundredth, I think. I got a coke and Hershey bar from the fridge, sat down on the floor beside Opal, and then started questioning her about Luther. That went nowhere. She didn't really know anything, which didn't surprise me because she never went anywhere, but she told me to check with Delbert when he got back, he'd probably know something. Having hit another deadend, I decided to ride around town for a while and kill some time. Delbert wouldn't be back until lunch time and I had a destiny with *work* ahead of me. Maybe Big Mommie would forget about the chores. Not likely, but it was a thought.

"Come back for supper tonight, we're having chicken fried steak. I'll save you a plate," Opal called as I headed towards the side door to the garage. I gave her a back-handed wave and an, "Okay, see you then," as I left. It sounded better than meatloaf.

I stalled for as long as I could, circling from Opal's to the Dairy Mart, a ride through downtown, and then on to Big Mommie's. I knew I couldn't put it off any longer, so I headed on home. It was time to face whatever God-awful chore she had waiting for me. I also wanted to see if Luther was still on his porch. I slowed my pace and pedaled easy along Main Street, not being in much of a hurry to work or see Luther. His house came into view, growing larger as I gained ground; it sat deserted and lonely on the corner and looked out of place, surrounded by the holiness of the church and the manicured yards with fresh, lively houses. It gave me the creeps, like something out of a movie. To my relief, there was no Luther sitting on the porch.

Finally, arriving at Big Mommie's, the distinct smell of meatloaf, beans, and greens assaulted my nose as I cut through the garage to go inside.; however meatloaf was the least of my worries, I discovered. Through the back screen door and there bigger than life, was Luther Megs chopping weeds along the fence line in the alley. *Our weeds*. Two, fifty-five gallon trash barrels belched forth burning trash and black smoke. Piles of overgrown weeds that'd been bludgeoned down to the roots,

lay like fallen soldiers on the battlefield. Luther chopped and hacked the roots of those evil weeds with a fury. Hell hath come to Big Mommie and Poppy's, and I was scared to death.

“What's L-Luther doing back there?” I stammered in disbelief to Big Mommie, while she busied herself in the kitchen.

“Your grandfather went by his house and picked him up earlier while you were out playing somewhere. He said he'd rather pay Luther to do the job than have you do it halfway.”

I didn't know whether to be relieved or insulted.

Poppy was in his easy chair watching *As the World Turns* and eating his turnip-greens and meatloaf from a metal TV tray. He always ha-rumped, like he was clearing his throat before he'd start a conversation; it was a clue that he had something to say and whoever his words were directed, needed to listen. “Ah—um ... Jewel. Fix a plate for Luther, and give him some cold water from the icebox. Benny can take it out to him.”

Things were beginning to happen a little too fast for me at this point. Luther had a hoe in his hands and a fire at his back and Poppy wanted me to serve him lunch! What kind of death wish was this? I was about to come face to face with the Boogieman of Anadar --- and none of my friends would be there to witness my young and untimely demise.

I tried to think of a way out of the situation while Big Mommie fixed a plate with extra large helpings and a quart jar of ice-cold water for Luther. I wasn't coming up with anything. She took a dishtowel and wetted it in the sink. “Give this to Luther so he can cool off.”

I looked like a waiter from the City Cafe, with a plate of food in one hand, a jar of water in the other, and a wet dishtowel draped over my forearm. She opened the screen door for me, and I started the scariest and longest trek down the sidewalk of my short life. When I got to the fence, Luther looked up with those beady, bloodshot slits and eyeballed me. He swiped a long- sleeved arm across his brow, wiping away a bucket of sweat, walked over, and opened the back gate for me.

Oh God, please help me, I prayed in silence. Then something like a croak came from the back of my mouth that sounded something like, “Uh, hey Luther.” I waited for him to whack my hand off with his hoe and just kill me on the spot. “I brought you some lunch,” I said, thinking food just might distract him from killing right then and there. He stopped and then leaned the hoe against the fence. At least he’d put down his weapon.

“Thanks,” he said. Luther’s shirt was completely soaked in sweat, his khaki cap looked like he’d dumped it in a bucket of water, and beads of sweat covered his face like a rash. His hands shook as he reached for the plate of food and water. I think it embarrassed him. He squatted down slowly, crossing his legs Indian style, and balanced the plate on his crossed ankles and set the tall Mason jar of water in front of him as he leaned back against the fence. He definitely looked like he needed the rest. The water was the first to go. He turned it up and in two quick gulps the contents was gone; he set it on the ground next to him, thick calloused hands handling it as though it was expensive porcelain.

“Sure is hot, ain’t it, Luther?” I said, not knowing what else to say.

“Yes, it is,” he said. His voice sounded like tires rolling slowly over a gravel road.

I think we both felt awkward. I sure did. “Can I get you some more water?”

Luther’s sad bloodshot eyes shifted and gazed directly at my own unsure eyes. Then --- in that low gravel-scratched voice, almost pleading, he dropped a bombshell of a question. “Benny, you think Mr. C. has a beer in there that I might have? I’m kinda shaky and need somthin’ ta’ steady my nerves.”

My brain reeled. *Me* get a beer for Luther? Was he *crazy*? Luther and I both knew that he didn’t intend for me to ask Poppy for a beer. He wanted me to sneak one out for him. It was an unspoken understanding that lingered like a killer in the shadows between the two of us. We were one in thought. He was asking me to commit an act of thievery that would certainly guarantee me a trip to the willow tree for a fresh whip ... if I got caught, that is. This was an opportunity I couldn’t pass up. “Maybe,” I said, with a sly, conspiring tone and a quick glance at the house to make sure no one was

spying on us. I already had a plan forming in my young, adventurous brain. “Give me your water jar,” I said, sticking out my hand. “I’ll be right back.” My mind churned and plotted all the way back to the house.

As I strode up the sidewalk, I started to sweat like Luther. The plan was doable and my status as *braver-than-heck* was about to be elevated with the boys in town. I opened the backdoor and went inside; the cool air hit my sweat-soaked face like a blast of arctic air. Big Mommie and Poppy had finished eating and were sitting in their easy chairs, feet propped out straight, watching a new game show called *Password*.

“*And the password is....*” I heard the host say, as I nervously strolled to the icebox. The kitchen and den were all one room, so they had a clear view of me. I knew that the very act of stealing one of Poppy’s beers could be a life-ending deed if I got caught.

I held up the empty water jar for them to see. “I’m gonna get some more water for Luther,” I announced, a little too loud.

Poppy looked up, staring over the rim of his reading glasses, “Don’t pester him, Benny.”

“I won’t, I’m just getting him some more water. He’s powerful thirsty out there, you know.” I kept my back to them as I opened the icebox door. There, sitting on the bottom shelf, were three Schlitz beer cans. Every night, Poppy drank a single beer during the *Ten O’clock News*; he said it helped him to sleep better. He knew exactly how many beers were in the fridge on any given day. My back to my grandparents, I slowly lifted up my T-shirt, grabbed a beer, and stuck it down the front of my jeans. The frosty chill of the can against my bare skin took my breath away; I pulled my tee shirt back over the front of my jeans, and quickly snatched another quart of water from the top shelf.

“I’ll be right back,” I called. I walked as steady as possible towards the back door. Glancing to my right, I noticed Poppy studying my progress more so than paying attention to *Password*. I gave him a nervous grin and tried to look normal. As normal as a thief can look when he’s been caught in the act. The backdoor almost came off the hinges when I finally bolted through.

Luther hadn't moved; he still sat, leaning against the chain-linked fence, staring out at the cotton field like he didn't have a care in the world. I handed him the water jar first. I could tell he was disappointed when he saw I was empty-handed. Keeping my back to the house, I dramatically withdrew the wet, frosty beer from the front of my jeans and then triumphantly plopped down next to him. With pride and gusto, I placed the stolen treasure beside him.

"Thanks, Benny," was all he said.

I was hoping for a little more than just *thanks*. After all, I just risked life and limb to steal him one of Poppy's beers! He reached in his pocket, took out a worn metal can opener and pierced two triangle holes opposite each other on the top of the can. I'd completely forgotten about an opener. He turned the beer can up, and the contents disappeared in seconds. He let that settle for a few seconds, smacked his lips lightly, then stood up and dropped the empty can in the burning trash barrel. The evidence was quickly consumed by the fires of hell. He grabbed his hoe from the fence and ran an experienced finger across the sharp edge of the blade. He turned to leave and said, "Thanks again," was all he managed in the way of conversation, and then he started chopping weeds along the fence line again. I gathered the empty plate and left the full jar of cold water on the ground.

Password was over. Big Mommie shelled black-eyed peas while she watched the next show, and Poppy was getting ready for his trip back to the domino hall.

I announced, "I'm gonna spend the night with Opal tonight. She invited me." Big Mommie looked up at me like I was up to something. She was right. I didn't want to be around for the *Ten O'clock News*.

I made it to Opal and Delbert's without incident and didn't do any night time prowling. The encounter with Luther took out all my steam for the night. I just watched TV till I fell asleep on the couch. The following day, around lunchtime, I headed back to Big Mommie's and the scene of the crime to face the music. All night long, I jumped every time the telephone rang at Opal's. I knew it was Big Mommie, calling to tell me to get myself home and to stop by the willow tree on the way in and

fetch a fresh sapling. I kept trying to think of a good story about the missing can of beer, but I wasn't having much luck coming up with a good lie.

My legs pumped the pedals and my mind was turning like the wheels, still trying to conger up a good story, when I spotted Luther up ahead. He plodded along with the burlap potato sack slung over his shoulder. I could tell his eyes were cast down by the angle of his head. I pedaled harder to catch up with my new friend.

"Hey Luther," I said, coasting up slowly beside him. I wasn't scared of him anymore, but he didn't respond with a word of greeting and kept walking along. I braked to a stop and watched him stroll away from me as though I'd never appeared beside him. I guess Luther didn't have anything to say today.

When I finally got home, Big Mommie and Poppy were watching the end of *Password*. It was an eerie feeling, walking into the very same scene from the day before.

When he saw me come in the kitchen, Poppy got up from his easy chair, grabbed his hat and pouch of Red Man Chewing Tobacco from the bar and strode towards the kitchen.

Here it comes, I thought. I froze in my tracks.

"Ah-um ...," Poppy sounded, clearing his throat. "Jewel, I'm going up to Pinky's and get a case of beer. I seem to be running low. Must've miscounted."

He walked by and winked at me, not saying a word.