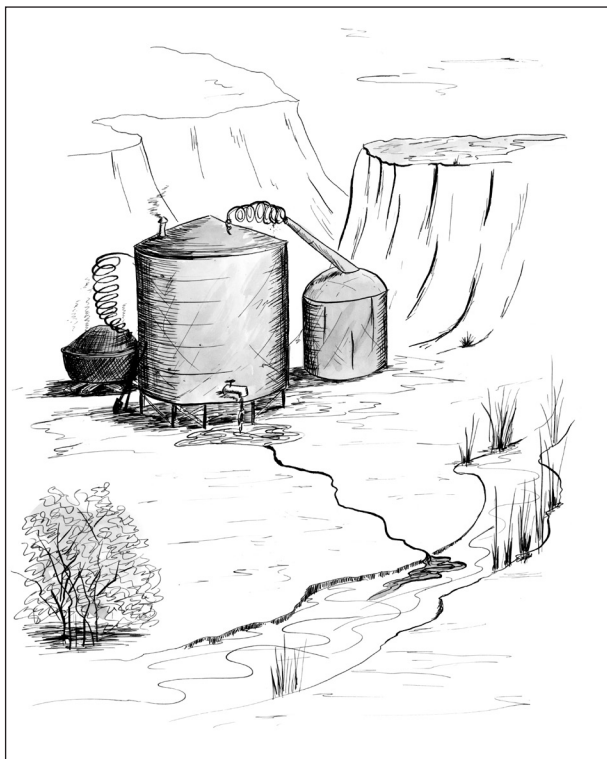


Oil Field Brats

by Joyce Esely



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Royal Fireworks Press
Unionville, New York



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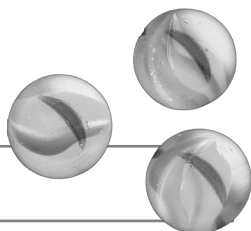


ISBN: 978-0-88092-529-7

Printed and bound in the United States of America using vegetable-based inks on acid-free, recycled paper, and environmentally-friendly cover coatings by the Royal Fireworks Printing Co. of Unionville, New York.

CHAPTER ONE

She's a "Townie"



“You’re fudging!”

“Am not!”

“I saw your hand move as you flicked the marble!”

“Never did!”

“Did so!”

“Well, you histed your last marble shot!”

“I didn’t!”

The other marble players looked up from their positions around the circle drawn on the ground. They watched as one of the accusers drew back his fist and buried it in his opponent’s stomach.

“Fight!” went the cry. All around the dusty, weed lined playground, heads turned to look. “It’s one of those oil field brats again.”

“Hey, Betty Lou, your brother is fighting a townie again.”

Betty Lou jumped up from the jacks circle and ran to the scene of the fight. Without hesitating, she flung herself on the back of the boy who was “windmilling” his arms toward Billy Joe.

“Hey, get her off!”

“Aw, come on, Betty Lou, this is my fight. Stop that,” called her brother.

The boy continued to turn round and round trying to shake the girl from his back. Billy Joe was trying to grab his sister whose brown stockinged legs gripped the boy around the waist while her fists continued to pummel his head and shoulders.

Billy Joe's blue eyes flashed as he said sternly, "Betty Lou, stop that, it's not ladylike."

Betty Lou suddenly jumped from the boy's back and faced her brother, her face as red as her hair, as she said, "I'm as ladylike as anyone."

"I don't need you to fight my fights for me," he said as he moved off toward the marble circle.

"I thought there were two of them on you. Two against one isn't fair," she said angrily.

"Here comes the teacher," echoed across the yard.

Everyone scattered. Billy Joe returned to the marble game and was quickly absorbed in the game as was the other boy involved in the fight. It was as though it hadn't happened.

Betty Lou pulled up her stockings and watched the teacher move past the playground. With a pang of envy she looked at the boys kneeling in a huddle on the ground, joking with one another. She thought wistfully, *Boys never have trouble making friends with townies*. She looked across the yard to the separate groups of girls playing jacks. The division was clear; one circle was town girls and the others were the "outsiders," the oil field brats and girls from the town who were too poor, too dumb, or too new to be accepted by the town girls.

Even though her hair was styled in the latest fashion, the Dutch Boy bob; even though she wore a clean, fashionable gingham dress with a bow in the back and smocking on the front; even though she had good manners and made good

grades; even though she was the best jacks player on the playground, she was not accepted in the “townie” group of players.

Her “red-headed-temper,” as Mama called it, flared as she thought how unfair it was that because Papa worked on an oil field rig, and Mama worked at the diner, she couldn’t be friends with anyone who had lived in Cedar City before the oil boom started. Slowly she walked back to the girls sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk as she thought, “My papa is as nice as their papas. My mama is as nice and pretty as any of their mamas. I don’t like being called ‘an oil field brat!’”

She noticed the townie group of girls watching her so she defiantly threw back her shoulders, raised her chin and swaggered back to the game.

As she sat down and took the ball and jacks offered to her, one of the girls whispered, “You shouldn’t do that. The townies don’t like us and getting into fights makes it worse.”

“I was helping my brother, and I don’t care what the townies think. I’ll bet they wouldn’t try to help if their brothers were in trouble.”

She threw out the jacks and began to scoop them into her hand before the ball bounced again.

Betty Lou said scornfully, “They think they’re better than us, just ’cause they live in one place all the time. We can’t help it that oil fields are so rough. Someday we’re going to buy a house and live in one town all the time, too.”

Eunice, a newcomer whose father worked in the town, said, “My papa says oil field workers are like gypsies, they never settle down.”

Betty Lou lost her turn and handed the jacks and ball to the next girl in the circle, “We’re not like that. Mama works at the diner, Billy Joe helps at the drugstore after school, and

I mind the baby for a lady in camp. We're saving our money to buy a real house someday."

The recess bell rang, and the girls ran to get a place in line by the school door. Eunice said, "I've never known anyone whose mother works. Who takes care of you after school?"

Betty Lou looked at her in surprise. "I'm ten, almost eleven, and Billy Joe is almost thirteen. Why do we need someone to take care of us? You should meet my mama, you'd like her."

The girl hesitated. "I've got Tap after school. Maybe you could come to Tap class with me, and we could go after that. I've never been in a diner before."

Betty Lou nodded and said, "Sure. What's tap?"

Eunice looked surprised that someone didn't know about tap dancing lessons. With an air of superiority, she replied, "You'll see."

After school, the two girls walked along the dusty road to the main street of town. Cedar City wasn't large, but the few blocks of businesses were busy, and cars and trucks lined the street while neon signs flashed off and on, even in the bright sunlight.

Eunice turned away from the main street and led Betty Lou along a grassy walkway in front of neat lawns and brick houses.

"I took Tap for two years at our old place, before we moved here last month. That's one of the first things Mama did, was start me back in Tap. We'll have a recital in May, and I'll be in the jazz number. Mama's making my costume, all silver and blue. It cost \$20 just for the material," bragged Eunice.

Betty Lou was only half listening. She was trying to memorize the houses as they passed. She had to tell Mama about this quiet tree-lined street of solid brick houses. Through the open windows she could see tantalizing glimpses of rooms filled with bright curtains and soft comfortable furniture. For a moment, she felt a pang of despair—would they really live in a house like these someday?

Eunice led the way past fragrant lilac bushes, pushed open a large wooden gate, and crossed a neat green lawn to a pair of French doors set in the back of a large red brick house.

Betty Lou followed closely as they entered a large room, empty of furniture except for a few wooden benches along the wall with a large Victrola in one corner. The floor was polished wood and one wall was covered with a huge mirror.

“You can sit there on the bench where the mothers wait. Be quiet and don’t do anything,” Eunice commanded.

Betty Lou sat down on a bench near a large fair-haired lady who was knitting nervously. They smiled tentatively at one another. Betty Lou watched as Eunice and a group of girls, all ages, sat on the bench opposite and changed from high-topped buttoned or laced shoes into black patent leather low shoes tied with large black bows at the ankle. Into the room came a tall, slender lady, wearing a very short full skirt made of a shiny, stiff fabric and wearing tap shoes like the girls.

“Attention, class. Line up and begin your routine.”

She carefully lowered the arm of the Victrola onto a thick black record, and fast peppy music began to fill the room. The line of girls began to dance.

Betty Lou watched in fascination as the line of girls followed their teacher moving their toes, making turns, spins, hopping up and down, waving arms in exact movements. All

the time their feet were making loud rhythmic noises on the polished floor.

“Are you going to take lessons, too?”

The blond lady had to raise her voice to be heard over the noise of the tap dancers. Betty Lou tore her eyes away to look at the woman near her.

“I don’t know,” she answered truthfully.

“My little Selma’s been taking lessons since she was five; that’s her in the red sailor dress. You should come to the recital in May. Miss Sidles puts on a good show, and it’s such good experience for the girls.”

Betty Lou nodded absentmindedly. The cadence of the tapping, the music, and the mirror reflecting a long line of girls, was hypnotizing her.

Selma’s mother continued to talk. “Why didn’t your mother come with you? I’m about the only mother who stays to watch on Tuesdays. Of course, if you’re just starting tap, you’ll be in the beginners class. I think that meets on Wednesday, or is it Friday?”

“My mama works afternoons at the diner. How much do lessons cost? Your little girl is very good,” she said politely.

“Your mother works? At the diner? You must be one of those oil field br—children.” The coldness in her voice made Betty Lou look at her in surprise. “It costs 50 cents a lesson but I’m sure I heard Miss Sidles say that all her classes were full.”

The lady looked down at her knitting and a cold silence endured through the rest of the lesson. Betty Lou didn’t care; she was utterly absorbed in the music and the tapping. Her feet kept time with the music, and she watched carefully the way the students moved their shiny black shoes.

All too soon, the lesson was over, and she followed Eunice out the door and back down the lilac lined walk. “That was really the cat’s meow,” she told Eunice, who had changed back into her brown high-top school shoes.

“Can I look at your tap shoes?”

Eunice handed them to her in a careless fashion and watched silently as Betty Lou inspected the shoes.

“They’re so pretty; no shoe strings or shoe buttons. And this is what makes the noise, this metal thing on the toes?”

Betty Lou stooped to the sidewalk and with a hand in each shoe, hit them on the concrete. The loud resounding noise made her squeal with pleasure.

“Oh, they’re lovely! I didn’t know there was such a thing. I’m going to ask Mama if I can take Tap.”

Eunice took back the shoes and dropped them into the school bag she was carrying. “I think Miss Sidles’ classes are all full. You might start next fall, if you’re still here.”

Betty Lou ignored the iciness of the girl’s voice. “There it is, the diner across the street. It used to be called just The Diner but when the oil boom started, Gus renamed it The Gravy Gusher. Isn’t that funny? Momma works the counter.”

She pushed open the glass doors and motioned for Eunice to take a seat on one of the stools at the counter. Eunice looked around curiously. The building was just big enough for a counter with twelve stools. Behind the counter ran a long shelf holding a coffee urn which was putting out steam and a pungent coffee aroma. A glass case held several large meringue-topped pieces of pie and one lone doughnut.

Mama, in a starched pink uniform, her hair as red as Betty Lou’s, turned to smile at them and asked, “How was school?”



“Mama, this is Eunice. I went to a tap lesson with her. Oh, Mama, can I take tap lessons? It’s wonderful. Show Mama your tap shoes, Eunice. And it’s only 50 cents a lesson, Mama. I want to learn how to tap.”

Eunice reluctantly pulled the black patent shoes from the school bag and offered them for inspection. Mama looked at the shoes, then at Eunice, then at the eager Betty Lou. She

ruffled her daughter's hair and said slowly, "We'll talk about it later at home, okay?"

"We want two brown cows and two fish-eyes," said Betty Lou with a grin. Eunice looked at her with a flash of alarm, but Betty Lou said, "It's just 'diner talk.' Wait and see, you'll like it."

Two men in overalls and blue and white striped railroad style caps came in and sat down at the end of the counter. Mama set glasses of water in front of them and reached for her order pad. She wrote down their order, then went to the kitchen pass-through and said, "Two brown cows, two fish-eyes, one pig between the sheets, poke Eve for one and a Murphy and two Javas."

Betty Lou giggled at the expression on Eunice's face. Without waiting for her to ask, she began to explain. "The 'pig' means ham. Sheets are white and so is bread so 'between the sheets' means on white bread. In the Bible, Eve was made from a rib, so 'poke Eve' means an order of ribs. Coffee comes from Java, so 'two Javas' means two coffees. 'Murphy' is Irish so that means an Irish baked potato. I think it's fun to listen, don't you?"

In spite of herself, Eunice was interested. "Why don't they just say 'ham sandwich on white bread?'"

"That's what I asked. Mama says they get so busy sometimes that they can't keep it straight."

Betty Lou whispered, "Gus doesn't remember too well unless it's odd sounding. I think it would be harder, but I guess he's used to it."

Mama set two glasses of chocolate milk in front of them and two bowls of white pudding. Eunice looked questioningly at the bowl. Betty Lou laughed, "A brown cow is just chocolate milk, and the bowl is tapioca pudding. It

does look sorta like fish-eyes, doesn't it? Gus makes the best I've ever eaten. When he adds raisins to it, he calls it 'roach pudding,' isn't that awful?"

They both shuddered and laughed as they spooned up the pudding. When they finished, Eunice looked uncertainly at Betty Lou.

"I don't have any money, but you invited me, so you have to pay."

With a carefree wave, Betty Lou said, "That's all right. It's 'on the house'. That means it's free because Mama works here."

They walked outside and stood on the corner a moment. Betty Lou said, "Can you see the clock at the drugstore from here?"

"Of course. It's 5:30. Can't you tell time?"

"Of course I can. I just can't see at a distance very well. Papa says I need glasses, but I'm not going to get any if I can help it."

"Why not?"

"I'd be 'old four eyes' as well as an 'oil field brat.' I have enough trouble with townies as it is." Eunice looked uncomfortable and made a move to turn toward home.

"Come down to the train station and meet my Uncle Walter. He's the engineer on the train. You can show me some tap steps while we're waiting."

Eunice looked even more uncomfortable as two "town" girls approached. They spoke to Eunice but ignored Betty Lou. After they'd passed, Betty Lou said, "*Townies!* You'd think I smelled bad or something. They ought to be glad the oil boom brought so much business to their town. Come on, show me how to do that tap step."

Eunice hugged her schoolbag containing the tap shoes and said slowly, “I don’t think I’d better. My mama had to pay a lot of money so I could learn how to tap. I don’t think it would be right for me to show you for free. It’s probably against the law, anyway.”

One of the town girls called to Eunice and she hurriedly said, “Mama says I can’t go to the train station ’cause of all the riff-raff coming to town. Uh, thanks for the snack.” Her voice trailed away as she hurried down the sidewalk, joined the town girls, and the three began to whisper and giggle.

Sadly Betty Lou watched the girls walk off, Eunice smiling at the townies and never once turning to wave at her.

She sighed and thought, “Eunice didn’t really want to be my friend, she just wanted to show off. She’s glad to be a townie.”

Blinking back tears. Betty Lou thought about black shiny tap shoes and tap dancing lessons. She moved off toward the train depot.





CHAPTER TWO

I Want To Tap

The depot was bright yellow in the late afternoon sun which made the windows look a little more dusty. One of the large baggage doors was slightly ajar. Betty Lou went into the empty waiting room and stepped on the large white weighing scale. She dropped a penny into the slot and watched the long red arrow move around the dial. She knew her weight, but she wanted the “fortune” that was now dropped into a cup under the dial. She took the card and read it as she walked toward the counter.

“How’s the fortune today?” grinned the man behind the counter. She looked up and smiled as the man looked at her over the top of his eyeglasses.

“I’ve been coming to meet Uncle Walter’s train every Tuesday and Friday for months now, and that machine always gives me the same fortune. Just once I’d like to read that we’re going to get rich and settle down.”

“What’s it say today?”

“Same as always, ‘Beware of strangers bearing gifts’,” she laughed. The rattle of the telegraph key caught the man’s attention and he turned away. He automatically pushed up the green eyeshade and looked up and down the tracks as he sat down in the bay window and reached for the telegraph key.

Betty Lou watched as he wrote rapidly. She liked listening to the Morse Code of the key although it sounded like a confusing jumble of clicks to her. A low train whistle sounded in the distance, and she hurried to the platform.

The man finished with the telegraph message, took off the green eyeshade, and replaced it with a blue cap that had “Stationmaster” stitched in gold on the front. He came out of the baggage section pushing a tall metal-wheeled cart filled with boxes and cartons.

The train could be seen in the distance, smoke rising from its stack. Another whistle made Betty Lou cover her ears. With a loud wheezing, grinding, and coughing noise, the train pulled in and stopped. Clouds of steam covered the platform and Betty Lou stepped back a few paces. The stationmaster pushed the cart to an open freight car door, while farther along the cars, the conductor helped a lady step down onto the platform.

An overalled figure hopped down the ladder from the engine’s cab. With a wide grin, Uncle Walter said, “There’s my girl. How’re you doing, Sunshine?”

Betty Lou smiled and gave him a hug. He pushed his engineer’s blue and white striped cap farther back on his head and revealed hair as red as Betty Lou’s.

“I’m fine and so is Mama, Papa, and Billy Joe. I saw a tap dance lesson today and oh, Uncle Walter, it was wonderful. I want to learn to tap.”

She began to shuffle her feet in a poor imitation of the dancers in tap class. Uncle Walter watched fondly.

“You’ll make a great little tap dancer, Sunshine. I’ve got some papers for your papa, but first I want to look for—”

“I know, hot boxes,” she giggled. It was a family joke that when she was little, she thought Uncle Walter was looking for real boxes under the engine. She had been teased a lot before she realized it was a railroad term meaning a wheel bearing that was hot from friction and not turning properly.

While Uncle Walter inspected the underside of the engine and squirted a spot here and there with a large oily can, Betty Lou chattered about school and the tap lesson. Uncle Walter gave her a smile that looked just like Mama's as he handed her a stack of newspapers and said, "Tell your papa to look at these. There's word of a new strike in the Panhandle, and he ought to look into it."

Betty Lou nodded and gave him a hug, then stepped back as he climbed the ladder to the cab and leaned out to wave at the conductor. The little, stout man waved back, shouted "All aboard!", waved toward the end of the train and stood on the bottom step of the car steps as the train began to move. Steam billowed out of the underside of the engine, the big wheels began to slide, then caught and began to move.

With a grin, Uncle Walter looked down at her, moved a lever and laughed as she covered her ears from the whistle. She watched the passenger cars, the mail car, and the baggage car slide by. She waved at the man leaning out of the caboose window, then the train disappeared down the line of tracks.

Betty Lou picked up the stack of newspapers and walked back toward town. As she passed the drugstore, she waved at the thin figure of her brother who was mopping the doorway area, then she continued down the dirt road toward the oil field.

The closer she got to the towering derricks, the sound of the drilling was louder, and the smell of sour gas and crude oil was more pronounced. A line of hastily built shotgun houses were scattered among the rigs, surrounded by dirt, weeds, buffalo grass, and yucca plants. She stepped on a concrete block that served as her porch step and pushed open the door. For a moment she stood looking through the tiny, dusty, three room house with its mismatched furniture.

She thought bitterly, “No wonder the townies don’t like us. If I lived in a nice house, I wouldn’t visit anyone living here either.”

The term “shotgun” house referred to the idea that since all three rooms were in a line, a shotgun aimed through either door would shoot through all the rooms without touching anything along the way. Betty Lou thought sourly, “I wouldn’t care if a shotgun blew the whole place away.”

She threw her books on the bed in the first room, deposited the newspapers on the bed in the second room, then turned sideways to get past the sewing machine to get to the last room. In the kitchen, she checked inside the top of the wooden icebox, saw the block of ice had only melted slightly, grabbed a few saltines from an opened box, and continued out the back door toward the oil rig nearby.

She waited until one of the men saw her standing below the derrick and tapped the man kneeling near the drill. He looked up, smiled and waved, then climbed down the derrick ladder.

They walked away from the noise of the rig as he said, “Hi, there, Sunshine. How was school?”

She said impatiently, “Okay, of course. Papa, I saw a tap dance lesson today and I want to learn. Can I take tap? It’s only 50 cents a lesson and I’d practice really hard. Can I, please, Papa?”

“Tap dancing, eh? Sounds okay to me but we’ll be leaving here in a few weeks. This field is used up. Time to move on.”

“Uncle Walter sent you some papers about a new strike, but I don’t remember the name of the place.”

“There’s always a new strike so we’re always moving on, right?”

Betty Lou sighed and asked, “Are we always going to be moving? Are we ever going to stay in one spot longer than one school year?”

He gave her a hug as he said, “Don’t give up, Sunshine. We’ll find a ‘boom’ someday that’ll be so big, we’ll stay so long, you’ll be begging to move again.”

Betty Lou giggled and said, “Never!” She looked up at him. He was tall, broad-shouldered and blue-eyed, his overalls and cap were stained with oil and grease and she thought he was the handsomest man alive.

With a sigh, she said, “I’m minding Mrs. Badgett’s baby while she goes to the store. She’ll pay me a quarter. That’s half what a tap lesson costs.”

Papa laughed and turned back to the derrick. She walked back to the line of shacks thinking, *I wonder if the new oil strike is in a town with a tap teacher.*

