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THE BERRY PICKERS

BY JIM BOWMAN

Herbie Morton's aunt was Bess Meyers, the owner of Meyers' Berry Land. Most of us figured that was the reason she let him start picking that summer, when he was only ten. Tommy Robinette and myself, and everybody else, had to wait until we were twelve; that was a rule at Berry Land, until Herbie.

Ten acres of currants and red raspberries could keep a lot of kids busy. If you were twelve and lived on the west side of Sand City, and you had a bicycle, and your mother got along all right with Bess Meyers, then you naturally spent a month and a half that summer picking berries. It was something you looked forward to for years, like starting to school and wearing long pants. But, like all of these, it was a letdown after the first day. All the excitement was packed into that one morning, after someone had seen the small "berry pickers wanted" sign pasted to the telephone pole at the end of the long dirt driveway.

The three Burton brothers and their sister, Sarah, rode in ahead of us and parked their bicycles in the wooden rack, built against the rear of the basket-shed. Tommy and I rested ours alongside without saying a word. Sarah was our age — this was her first year — and she stood shyly by herself, ready to follow the moves of her big brothers.

Pat Burton, who was fifteen, stood by the bike stand while his twin brothers, who were a year younger, walked over with their sister and turned to watch. Pat held a brown paper bag up to us in his hand.

"Where's your lunches — or is she only gonna let the little kids work half a day?" he said.

"We're gonna ride home and eat and come back and work all day," Tommy said, flushing.

"You gotta eat here. There ain't no time for you to go ridin' home if you want to work here."

"We'll bring 'em tomorrow, Pat," I said, hoping he would go away if he found out I knew his name.

"Okay, Bowman, sure, but today you and Robinette are gonna sit and watch the rest of us eat. And if you squeal to Mrs. Meyers that you didn't bring no lunches she's liable to send you both home for good. You shoulda known to bring a lunch." Then he turned, shaking his head, and walked around to the front yard. Sarah and the twins tagged along behind him. Sarah turned once and looked back at us to see if we were following. She was clutching her brown bag tightly with two hands.

In the yard, Tommy and I stood apart from the Burtons who had sprawled on the love seats inside a latticed archway, twined with wild roses and dead weeds and shaded by the giant catalpa tree that grew next to the large white farm house. We examined our features in the mirrored surface of the crystal ball that sat on a birdbath stand in the center of the yard. Our faces appeared normal at a distance, but as we came closer, the forehead and chin began to stretch out — until the face was deformed into a huge elongated nose, with the eyes and nostrils appearing as black slits at either end.

By eight o'clock there were fifteen pickers standing or sitting in the front yard. The front door of the house opened and Bess Meyers motioned us around to the back. She was dressed in men's overalls, with her gray hair tucked up loosely under a blue cap, like a railroad engineer's. This was the only outfit I had ever seen her wear — in her horse-drawn wagon, delivering berries along Spring Street on summer evenings.

We stood in a circle at the door of the basket-shed while she gave us our instructions in a loud voice, as though she thought we were all deaf.

"We'll work in the currant field until noon and then start on the raspberries next to the house. I'm going to give one of these six cent tickets for every quart of currants you pick," she held up

a quart box of dirty yellow slips of paper, each one stamped with a pink six, and another box of pink slips stamped with a yellow eight, "and eight cents for each quart of raspberries. And I don't intend to catch anybody eating berries more than once, 'cuz the first time, you go right home. You hear that, Herbie?" She snapped her head at the small boy in blue overalls, standing, as though he had just materialized, at the corner of the basket-shed. He was picking in his left ear with his finger and when she spoke to him he jerked his hand away — to the wide brim of his new yellow straw hat, which he removed and held over his stomach. He lowered his head, as though he had just been caught chewing a mouthful of berries, then he walked forward and stood with us by the basket-shed door.

Everybody was looking so hard at Herbie they missed most of Bess Meyers' explanation about turning the tickets in for money on Saturday mornings. Herbie was listening to every word. He was shorter than anyone else there, by six inches, and had fine silky blond hair that hung in bangs on his forehead. His lips seemed painted on a white skin that stretched tight over the bones of his face, without the slightest trace of a tan. Often he lifted his straw hat, as if he was going to put it back on his head, but then only scratched the coarse weave a few times against his ear, and lowered it again. Everyone knew Herbie, and knew he wasn't twelve, or even eleven. Anyone could see that he wasn't old enough to pick — even if he was Bess Meyers' nephew.

Bess Meyers handed out ten stained quart berry boxes to each of us, including Herbie, and then she took off down the lane to the currant field at such a pace we had to trot to keep up. Herbie was marching right along behind her.

"Did you see the bike he came on?" Pat Burton said to anyone who was listening.

"A little girl's bike," said one of the twins, "not even as big's Sarah's old one."

"How's come she let him pick?" Tommy asked, dropping back alongside the Burtons. "He's only ten, I know that's all he is."

"He's a relation," Pat said, sneering. "He'll wish he wasn't though, I'll bet."

The Burtons seemed more friendly now, and Tommy and I walked along with them at the rear of the procession.

I could see the big yellow straw hat bouncing along up ahead, right back of Bess Meyers' behind. I didn't like him working with

us either, and I could see no one else did, especially Pat Burton who was keeping up a steady banter about boys who rode girl's bicycles being panty-waists. Herbie had been at our place once when his father came to see my dad about going to some meeting. My mom and I were on the porch and Herbie came up and sat down on the woven straw rug and began to play with the cat.

"I like yellow cats better'n black ones," he said, petting.

"Do you have a black cat, Herbie?" my mom asked.

"No." That was all he said.

"What color's your cat, Herbie?"

"Blue-green."

"He must be very pretty," my mom said, giving a little wink at me.

"Oh yes, he's beautiful — I like him better'n black ones," Herbie said.

He went on rubbing our yellow cat; first, backward, right out to the end of the tail, and then forwards again, up to the ears, leaving the fur standing in little clumps that buzzed like a wind-shaken oat field. I didn't even talk to him, because I didn't want anything to do with a little kid who talked about having a blue-green cat. He didn't try to talk to me either. When he left he jumped to the ground from the porch, missing the steps. He rolled over in the grass and lay still as if he was dead. Then he jumped to his feet like a rabbit, brushed his hair down over his eyes with both hands, and ran and got in the car ahead of his father, and lay down again on the seat. When the car pulled into the street, his head suddenly popped up at the window.

"Goodby sweet little yellow kitty-cat," he yelled. "I have to go home now."

At the currant field Bess Meyers gathered us in a group and said she was going to put three of us on a bush; when it was finished we were to go on the the next bush toward the east. She showed us new pickers how to snip the red clusters off by the stem with our finger nails. Then she told us about the poison spray that was on the berries and how we would get dreadfully sick if we should eat any. Pat, who was now our friend, whispered that it was only a trick, and to eat as many as we wanted, as long as we didn't get caught.

The rows of squatty green bushes were overgrown with milkweed, wild carrot, and timothy. Between the rows the ground was newly plowed and the furrows lay dark and firm. Bess Meyers named us in groups of three, and told us not to race with each other, and again, that we were not to eat the berries. I got a bush with Herbie and Sarah. Tommy was next to us with Pat Burton and an older girl with freckles who wore red shorts and didn't want to squat down in the high grass. Pat finally pulled her down and she laughed, brushing the furry beards of timothy away from her neck and legs.

Bess Meyers walked up and down the row, watching. She stood by our bush a long time, while Herbie's small white hands flew to the berry box and back. He paid no attention to her or to Sarah or me. Once Bess Meyers bent down and snipped a weed-hidden cluster from the bottom of the bush and dropped it into Herbie's box. Herbie looked up at her, then went on picking.

"Herbie, you can't miss any, now," she said. "You have to start down here," she pulled away the thick grass at the base of the bush and broke off another cluster, "and go right to the top, without skipping around — pulling off the big pretty ones first, and then forgetting some and leaving them to rot."

Herbie only made his fingers fly faster, while his wide blue eyes flicked up and down the bush and into the grass, trying to see everything at once. His box was almost full.

Bess Meyers yelled down the row to all of us: "I'm going to go back to the house now, and pretty soon I'll be back with the wagon to pick up the berries. When you fill a box, leave it by the bush." Then she was striding back up the lane toward the barns, swinging her arms and whistling, like a farmer boy, whose happiness is found around him, and under his feet, and over his head, as though nothing could exist except the perfumed air, the grassy lane, and the blue forever of the sky. When she had gone everyone relaxed, except Herbie.

There was still dew on the weeds and I could feel the dampness rub off on my legs. "You're going to get wet, Herbie," I said. I wanted him to stop picking so fast. I wanted to make him uncomfortable. But it was Sarah who stopped and stood up and stomped.

"I'm wet," she said timidly.

"You tired already?" her brother Pat called.

"My legs are wet," she repeated.

"Oh, sit down!" he said, and seeing little Herbie, unconscious of what was going on around him, he added, "Hey, Morton, where you think you're going so fast?"

Herbie didn't seem to hear.

"Hey, Herbie!" Pat yelled.

Herbie stopped picking and looked up, startled, as though he had suddenly realized we were there, as though he had been visiting in a world of his own where people didn't exist.

"Where do you think you're going in such a rush?"

"I'm filling my basket with berries," Herbie said.

"No kidding!" Pat said, looking around at us.

"You're going to get all wet, Herbie. See this—" I snapped a beard of timothy. The dew hit him in the face.

"It's like rain, isn't it?" Herbie said. One of the drops sparkled on his lower lip. He laughed and flicked it off with his tongue.

When we had picked the first bush we moved on to the next, leaving four full boxes; and Herbie and Sarah each carried a partially full one. But Herbie had barely covered the bottom of his, and Sarah had almost filled hers to the top. He didn't notice though, for at the second bush he found a hard, green beetle in the damp weeds. He raised it to his nose—and sniffed. "Like dead weasels," he said.

"Eat it, Herbie—they're good!" Sarah said.

I hoped he would, but he held it and let it crawl along his finger.

"It's a stink bug, Herbie. They're poison," I said.

He set it back on a weed and I thought he was going to cry—more from pity that such a pretty bug had to live as poison than fear for himself, who had touched it. Sarah took a clod of dirt, knocked the bug to the ground, and smashed it.

Herbie stared at the damp stain. "Where did it go?" he asked in amazement.

"I squashed him, he's poison," Sarah said. The clod was still in her hand and she tossed it into the dirt between the rows. I could see she was a little sorry, because she began to hunt for berries in a spot she had just picked clean.

But Herbie could not connect the spot with the beetle. As though he had not heard her, he said: "I guess he crawled away

into his hole. He's poison." And then he smiled at me, and I think he knew I had been lying.

The second bush had many withered currants and Herbie pulled each one off the ripe clusters before dropping them into his box. He put the dead ones in a pile on his lap and often he stopped to study one, turning it over and over between his fingers. Pat and Tommy and the freckled girl were a bush ahead of us, laughing, but picking steadily.

"Come on, Herbie," I said, "everybody's ahead of us. Quit playing and get to work." I was disgusted. I didn't want to be left behind because of a silly kid who was only working because he was a relative of the boss.

He had almost stopped picking now. Each cluster had to be judged. Some he placed in piles on his left and some on his right. From these he sometimes — after much study — choose one to go into the box. The pile of withered berries in his lap grew larger.

He held up a choice cluster of shining red berries. "If there's nobody bad here, they get to go on a picnic to the ledges and see the caves." He examined it closely. "Oh, oh, Jimmy cried and spit and was bad, so nobody can go today." He pulled away a brown berry and put it in his lap. "There was one bad boy, so nobody can go today." He put the cluster on the pile at his left. "But, tomorrow they can go, all except Jimmy, 'cuz he cried and spit and was bad. He can't go, ever, and neither can the other kids." He pointed to the pile on his right. Then he looked up and stared steadily at some point behind me, his eyes blank, waiting, and finally, after almost a minute, he smiled and picked up a cluster from the pile on his left. "All right," he said, holding it up to his face by the stem, "you can go now, but don't get lost or be runnin' off by yourselves — you hear." He laid them gently in the bottom of his box.

At noon when the sun had climbed high above our heads and Bess Meyers had brought the wagon we were two bushes behind the rest. Herbie had begun to poke his finger in his ear again, and Sarah told him he was lazy and a big baby for trying to get out of work with a pretend ear ache. He ignored her and began to scratch his ear with an empty berry box. I was too disgusted with him to say anything. I was trying to figure a way to get to pick with Pat and Tommy in the afternoon.

Bess Meyers and two boys carried the brimming red boxes from the bushes to the small wagon and soon the wooden floor was covered. We were not halfway done with our rows, and it was time to eat. There was a race for the house — twenty of us out-running the slow wagon, up the dirt hill behind the barns, and in a last charge, diving and falling across the back yard — and at the finish, leaning against the basket-shed, panting, unable to talk.

Pat walked around the yard, getting his wind while he fanned himself with his straw hat. Herbie didn't even race. He sat on the tailgate of the wagon, dropping withered berries off, one by one, on the lane behind him, talking to each one before he let it drop.

Tommy came up and asked if I was going to ride home and eat. I told him no — we wouldn't have time. Then he and I sat down under a maple tree, with our backs against the side of the basket-shed, and tried not to look hungry. But the twins gave us each a fried egg sandwich, and Sarah divided an orange for us. Pat and the freckled girl sat giggling by themselves on the grass by the bike rack. Herbie started toward us, after the wagon had stopped and he had climbed down, but his aunt came and talked to him and then he went into the house with her.

"Oh, no, don't let the cute little thing eat out here; the flies might get him, and we couldn't have that," Pat nudged the girl and they both laughed.

"I hope he stays in the house," I whispered to Tommy. "Is he a screwy dope! I wouldn't mind if he stayed there all day." We leaned back and took little bites from our egg sandwiches to make them last.

It was pleasant and cool in the shade, where glints of sunlight filtered through the thick maple leaves. A mother sparrow darted to her nest, beneath the eaves of the shed, directly above our heads. We could hear her talking softly to the young that were hidden in the shadows. Then she left them, swooping out into the light, through the maple limbs, over the house, and then back into sight again, high above the drive, circling, until she finally settled on one of the two electric wires that stretched from the house to the side of the barn. It swung gently with her weight.

Before Tommy and I had finished our orange Herbie came out the screen door by himself. He walked slowly to the bike rack and began to back out the silver bicycle. He kept his left hand against

his head, running the forefinger around the lobe of his ear, sometimes inserting it in the ear and poking it gently. He walked around Pat and the girl, ignoring them. As he brought the bicycle out Pat reached over and pushed it back in place.

"Where do you think you're going now, Herbie?" he said.

"I gotta go home." Again Herbie started to pull out the bicycle. He kept looking back at the side door of the house.

"Didn't pick enough berries, huh?" Pat said.

"My ear's funny," Herbie said, rubbing his finger behind his left ear. "Aunt Bess says she's got to take me home, and I don't want to leave my bike."

"Oh, and I'll bet you don't want to go home, do you?"

"No!"

Pat winked at the girl and then took hold of Herbie's arm and made him bend down. "What's funny about your ear; you mean 'cuz it's so big and floppy and red?" he spoke almost in a whisper.

Herbie leaned in the direction Pat pulled and spoke loudly. "It buzzes funny and hurts; a hummingbird thought it was a pretty flower and flew inside and can't get out, and he keeps pecking away, and it hurts." His finger was in his ear again.

"Your aunt tell you that, about the hummingbird, Herbie?" the freckled girl said.

"No, I felt him go in out in the field. I had one in there yesterday too, when I was playing at home. But he got out, and he didn't peck around so much." He made it sound so true, and his ear did look like a pale foxglove blossom.

"But you don't want to go home, Herbie," Pat said. "You want to pick raspberries with us!"

"I do want to pick berries! My dad said I could pick them, and he told Auntie Bess I was the best berry picker in the whole world, and she says so, too. But now I gotta go home because the hummingbird is here again, and she has to take me home when it comes — Dad said." Herbie trembled as he talked and his fingers touched the two yellow, six cent tickets pinned to one of his overall straps.

"I guess when you're ten you should only work half a day," Pat said to the girl, shrugging.

"I can pick berries forever and ever if I want," Herbie said. "And I can pick all day, too!"

"Well, why ain't you gonna pick, then, huh?"

"My aunt won't—"

"Tell her you want to — that your head don't hurt any more."

"But, it does hurt!" He twisted his finger around and around in his ear, as though trying to scratch at some terrible itch he could not reach. His lips opened, showing two rows of glass-white teeth clamped tightly together.

"Well, tell her it don't — if you really want to pick, that is."

The screen door slammed and Herbie looked toward the house and let go of the bicycle. Half out of the rack, it tipped, almost falling. His aunt had come from the side door with an armful of baskets. He ran to her. "Can't I pick, Aunt Bess? I'm not too little to pick, am I?"

She stopped and set the baskets down on the grass. Herbie stood facing her and she pushed a hand through his hair. Behind him, afraid to look up, we tried to find something to do with our hands and our eyes. Pat neatly folded the squares of wax paper that had held his sandwiches and put them, one by one, into his brown lunch bag. Tommy and I bit desperately into our empty orange peels.

When she finally spoke, it was to Herbie. "No, Herbie, you're not too young, but the hummingbird has come again, and I have to take you home. You know that now, Dear." There was a hesitation in her speech and I looked up. She was not looking at us, or even at Pat. She was staring blankly into the maple tree. She suddenly seemed very old.

"I want to pick, Aunt Bess. I want to pick berries. Let me pick, please! He's not pecking so much, now — please!" His voice was pleading, and his hand hesitated, as it started toward his ear, and fell back at his side. The thin, white fingers opened and closed.

"Herbie, you—" Her voice was pitched too high—it broke, and she coughed, and cleared her throat, and then started out calmly. "Yes, Herbie, you can pick. You can pick every day. You know you're the best picker I have." She looked down at his ruffled hair and flattened it gently forward under her palm. "You wait right here in the shade." Then she turned and hurried back into the house.

None of us spoke, except Pat, who said: "Well, I'm for a drink of water before we go back out there."

We followed him to the faucet at the side of the house. He used his hands as a cup, then he filled his straw hat with water and

let it drain out slowly through the crown. Suddenly, Herbie stood in our midst, waiting his turn. He kept tilting his head to the side as though trying to hear something on the end of his shoulder. His lips were paler than they had been in the morning, and they shaped words we could not hear. When his turn finally came we all stepped back. He drank from his small cupped palms — filled them, bubbling under the faucet, and then pressed them tightly over his mouth, letting most of the water run out between his fingers, down over his chin and the blue bib of his overalls. Again, he filled them — this time trying to carry the water to his ear, but it spilt over his shoulder. He tilted his head to the right and tried to pour from his empty hands. He grinned at the sky and filled his hands again; now wrapping them, wet, around his ear.

Pat watched, and then said: "Oh, now he's giving his bird a drink — that's nice."

"He's hot too," Herbie said. "He's hot and the water is cold; he's drinking it, standing in it, and now he's happy and singing."

"Hummingbirds don't sing," I said. "They hum."

"Yes they do — mine does! He's singing louder, too, and he's growing bigger." Then Herbie stopped talking to us, but his lips still moved — whispering to his hummingbird, or to himself, or to something we could not know. He walked away from us, across the lawn, and stood in the driveway. A bird flew in front of him, toward the barns, and he stared after it — still whispering.

We finished getting our drinks.

When Bess Meyers rushed from the house she saw Herbie was not with us. "Where is he?" she shouted, startled. "Where's Herbie — I have to take him home."

"He was right over there, in the driveway," I said — but then we saw him at the edge of the raspberry field.

He lay on his stomach in the high weeds. Bess Meyers sprang forward, calling his name. She dropped to her knees beside him, her hand stroking his back. Berry-stained fingers had left a reddish-purple crisscross pattern around his ear. His hand was a claw, digging at the ear, and we could see the blood dropping from the torn lobe. When his aunt lightly touched the other side of his head he groaned and covered both ears with his palms — and then, suddenly, he was still, and able to talk again.

Bess Meyers helped him to his knees. He knelt there, his head brushed by a lace of wild carrot and timothy; he knelt, staring at

his aunt's face while his finger traced a slow circle around his left ear, over and over again. Then the smile — the dazed, far away smile — drifted across his face and he spoke to her, "He's growing, Aunt Bess — big — and bigger and bigger. He's singing, too. He can sing, can't he? Hummingbirds can sing?"

"Yes — yes, he can sing, Herbie." Her arm tightened around his shoulder.

"He's a pretty song — green and blue and red. And he's going to fly now, fly away over the barns and the fields, and he's going to carry me with him — and he won't peck anymore, ever. The song is getting louder too — don't you hear it?"

"I hear it, Herbie — it's very beautiful."

"I like pretty songs," he whispered, "and pretty birds." He said other things in a voice we couldn't hear.

Bess Meyers lifted him to his feet and walked him to the car. "There won't be any more work today," she said to us. When we moved on to the lawn to let the car go by we saw Herbie's face pressed to the window and we knew he was hearing a song no one else could hear.
