

## 1 | **Super Jenkins**

My first memories are of World War II. One day, late in the summer I was five years old, the fire engine in our town was running up and down the main street with its lights flashing and sirens blaring. Rich Square, North Carolina, where I was born, was a small, poor town, so the main drag was only a few blocks long and had only a single stoplight. But when the engine got to the end of the street it would turn around and come back the other way, clanging and making a racket, over and over again. I asked my mother why the fire truck was doing that, and she said it was celebrating because the war was over.

The winter before that, I remember my mother would go to a little shed in a cotton patch on the edge of town in the middle of the night a couple of times a week. She was part of a rotation with others from town pulling watch for the German air raids that everybody feared but that never came. I spent many nights in that little shack there with her, playing with whatever little wooden or tin toy I brought, while she scanned the skies.

My father never pulled air-raid watch. He was too busy working. He worked down at the ice plant only a couple hundred yards from my house, and he was working all the time. For days at a time, I would rarely see him. He was the foreman, though the plant was small. Usually he oversaw two other men at a time. He often said that the plant never took a break, so neither could he. He would come in to the house at, say, 4:00 A.M. and get two or three hours of sleep. Then he would head back to the plant, work until 9:00 or 10:00 P.M., come home and have dinner, get a few more hours sleep, and then head back out to the plant before dawn. That was typical. My father was drafted into World War II, but he never served. The doctor from our town wrote the draft board to get him out of going, not for any medical reason but because, the doctor wrote, “the town’s gotta have ice.”

My father was a big man, not like me. At a different plant he worked at in a nearby town called Rocky Mount we moved to for a few years, there was an elevator that would carry the five-hundred-pound blocks of ice up to the freight train cars for loading, but it broke a lot. When it did, my father would grab the blocks one by one with a giant set of tongs and carry them up a ramp to the train on his back. At times like these it seemed like there was nothing he couldn’t do.

Drinking was his weakness. He liked his alcohol, and Three Bears Whiskey was his favorite drink. When he wasn’t drunk, he was all right, but drinking got him into trouble a lot. His name was Clifton Rose Jenkins, but he hated his middle name—and he was none too fond of his first name, either, to be honest. One day, one of the black men who worked for him came into the office and said, “Hiya, Clifton.” This was a time when open racism was still a regular part of American life, especially in the South.

We called blacks “negroes” or even “niggers” back then and didn’t think twice about it. Blacks were forced to use different water fountains and different bathrooms, and when they came to a white person’s house, they had to use the back door. And when a black man talked to any white man, especially his boss, like this one was doing, he was supposed to address his boss formally—as in “Mr. Jenkins”—not use his first name. So my father, who was drunk at the time, picked a pistol out of the desk drawer and fired it at the man, missing him by only a couple of inches. A few days later, Mr. Boomer, who owned the ice plant, came down to the plant to see my father and give him hell for what he’d done. Even though it was a Sunday morning when Mr. Boomer came by, my father was drunk again, and you could hear them fighting from halfway down the street. Things got so heated that my father said, “to hell with it,” and climbed the electrical pole outside the plant. Usually you need spikes to climb a pole, but my father scampered up it like a big old bear, pulled the switch, and cut all the electricity to the plant. “Let your damn ice melt!” my father yelled. Mr. Boomer later told my mother that my father was the best worker he had ever seen, but he could hardly bear all the bad behavior that came with him.

My mother was born in North Carolina, in a town not far from Rich Square. Her family, the Coggins family, were cotton farmers and so was my father’s, so my mother and father knew each other when they were little kids. My father was about five or ten years older than my mother. The story goes that the first time he saw my mother, she was a baby, sitting in her bassinet. He was just a little kid, obviously, but he declared, “I’m gonna marry her some day.” And sure enough, he did. My mother was a teenage bride, no more than sixteen or seventeen, and soon after they got

married in 1930 or 1931, they started having kids. We had a large family. After losing twins at birth, my mother gave birth to three girls within just a few years of each other: Olivia, Anne, and Faye. Then came me, my sister Audrey, my brother Gene, and my sister Pat, who was born in 1950.

I got along with my brother and sisters well enough, and my mom always tried to make sure we had enough to eat, but that was tough. With seven mouths to feed, my parents were just barely getting by. Even in a poor town in a poor part of the country, we were still pointed at and whispered about as a poor family. At school, lunch cost twenty cents, but the poorest kids didn't have to pay. My brother, sisters, and I never had to pay. All of us wore hand-me-down clothes, whether they were church charity giveaways or from neighbors just taking pity on us. It was hard on our pride, of course, but we had no choice. The house I lived in for most of my childhood was a dump. Originally built as a warehouse, its walls were thin wood and provided very little insulation. My father split the place up into rooms. We didn't have an indoor bathroom or running water until the laws changed, making those things a requirement in every home, and my father had to put plumbing in.

There was no doubt that my father was a hard worker—one time he got a gold medal for making the most ice in the entire chain of ice factories that owned his plant—but the ice business wound up killing him. One day, a large ammonia pipe at the Rocky Mount plant broke. Ammonia was part of the process—how you made ice—because it has good properties for refrigeration, but it is also highly toxic. The pipes would break a lot, and on this day he was in one of the boiler rooms, a small place, fixing that busted ammonia pipe all day and into the night. He must

have inhaled tons of the stuff. He came home late that night, maybe 11:00 P.M. or midnight. I had just turned eleven years old and was already in bed, but he came into the kitchen, took his seat at the kitchen table, and put his head down to rest. My mother turned around to the counter to fix him a plate of supper. When she came back with his food, he was dead. He had an insurance policy of \$1,000, which left my mother enough money to give him a decent funeral and burial and not much else.

With her husband dead, my mother moved us all back to Rich Square, and she went to work as a nurse for a chiropractor in town. She would head to work in the morning when we went to school, and then come back around 5:00 or 6:00 to make sure we all had something for dinner. She tried to make sure we always had some meat, and I remember when we had enough spare butter to spread right onto our bread, that was a good day.

I was a troublemaker, and my mother was a strict disciplinarian. All through my childhood, I would just give her fits by acting up in school and running around town. Her favorite punishment was to sit me in a chair and not let me move or speak until she said I could go. She would leave me there for hours. When I was fourteen or fifteen, I started smoking. One time, I absent-mindedly pulled a pack of out my shirt or jacket and—I wasn't even thinking about where I was—started to light a cigarette inside the house. My mother popped me in the face so fast it wasn't even funny.

I am sorry for all I put her through, but I never once doubted that my mother loved me as much as a mother possibly could. I don't know if it was because I was the oldest son, or if one of the signs of being a good mother is that you convince each of your children individually that he or she is the favorite one, but she always

made me feel like I was special. For example, at school they would sell ice cream cones for a nickel during recess; money was always tight in my family, but, whenever she could, my mother would slide me an extra nickel so I could get an ice cream cone.

A few years after my father died, my mother remarried Dan Casper, a divorced man who drove a truck for the state penitentiary in a nearby town. He had divorced his first wife after he found her in bed with another man. He was a good enough man and treated my mom well, so we had no problems with him, though the family's finances never improved and we always scraped to survive. When I was fifteen, they had a daughter, whom they named Brenda, bringing the family total to eight children. I always felt a special closeness to my littlest sister. Since I was her big brother, she thought I was the greatest thing. When my second-youngest sister, Pat, was born, I was ten or eleven, so the last thing I wanted to be doing was holding and cuddling a baby. But by the time Brenda came around, I had changed my thinking. When I would come home, Brenda would see me and scream and climb into my lap. It broke my heart every time.

School and I never got along well. I did not like it, and I wasn't particularly good at it. I was always very good at a lot of stuff that they didn't teach in school—working on engines, doing carpentry and electrical work, and fixing things—but numbers and letters just never came easily to me. And even though I was a small guy, I was unusually strong and athletic for my size. One time, when I was a young teen, I picked up the transmission casing of a 1952 Ford and threw it on the back of a pickup truck all by myself—a feat that earned me my nickname, which I kept my whole time in Rich Square: Super (as in Superman). By the time I was thirteen or fourteen, I knew I would not be finishing high

school, but unfortunately for me, you couldn't leave school until you were sixteen, so I suffered through as best I could.

I filled my time out of school working. I worked down at the grocery store every weekday afternoon for \$7 a week, and during the summers I would mow lawns. Whenever I got an extra fifty cents in my pocket, I would head over to Scotland Neck, where there was a skating rink. If I went on a Monday night, there would always be some guys from the North Carolina National Guard who had just finished their once-a-week drills hanging out. They would show up in their uniforms, even though the rules said they were supposed to take them off when not on duty, because they knew the girls went crazy over them and the boys were impressed.

Watching those guys in uniform and hearing them talk about the stuff that they were doing made me want to try it. But I was only fifteen at the time, and you needed to be eighteen to join, or seventeen with a parent's signature. North Carolina and my family being what they were at the time, though, I didn't have a birth certificate, so my mom just signed the induction papers saying I was seventeen. Simple as that. Everybody who knew me knew I was too young—and, plus, here I was this skinny thing, swimming in my uniform—but without a birth certificate, nobody could prove I wasn't seventeen. Not that anybody really cared all that much. So soon enough, I became a member of D Company of the 119th Infantry Regiment of the North Carolina National Guard.

Every Monday night we would have two hours of drills in Scotland Neck. And two weekends a year plus two weeks per summer we would go to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, for rifle training and shooting practice. That first summer I joined up, I

volunteered for two months at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, for more in-depth instruction in weapons and tactics, similar to what you would get in basic training in the regular army. That was one of the hardest things I had ever done. That whole first year was tough, in fact. The first time I ever really got screamed at by a regular army officer that first summer at Fort Jackson, I thought, This is not for me. But after I got used to it, I came to enjoy everything about it. The uniforms, the discipline, the way you could see yourself getting better at important skills. Even the sixteen-mile, full-pack road marches in ninety-five-degree heat. No matter what kind of hell they were at the time, when you were done, you felt like you had accomplished something. And I liked being one of the guys that showed up at the skating rink in uniform. I liked being oohed- and aahed-over rather than one of those doing the oohing and aahing.

In all, I spent three years in the Guard. When I wasn't doing Guard stuff, I worked at the Pope Motor Company, a Ford dealership near my house. I was in charge of the lot, keeping the new and used cars clean and in working order. I liked my job, and I liked working on cars. My car, a 1950 Ford with a 1955 V-8 T-Bird engine, was the fastest car in Northampton County. During one of the back road races we would frequently have back then, they once clocked me driving my Ford at 140 miles per hour. But even while working and messing around, I always looked forward to the next training session most of all.

One night after Monday drills, instead of going to the skating rink, we went to the pool hall. There I had my first drink. I didn't have but two beers before I was drunker than hell. I woke up the next morning with the worst headache I had ever had, and I swore I would never drink again. I didn't take another drink

until I was twenty-one, on leave during my first posting in South Korea, in a club in Yokohama, Japan. I didn't know what to order. I didn't know the names of any drinks. I heard a soldier next to me ask for a Tom Collins, so I said I'd have the same.

I wasn't long in the National Guard before I made private first class, and it wasn't long after that that I made corporal. And then I went up for sergeant. But I didn't get it because the National Guard promotion review board asked me what I would do if a soldier under my command fled from battle. At summer training at Fort Jackson, they taught us if someone in combat turns and runs, you have to stop him at all costs, even if you have to shoot him. So that's what I told the promotion board: If one of my soldiers deserted, and I couldn't get him to return to battle, I would shoot him. Well, they didn't like that answer, even though that was what I had been taught. I didn't get my promotion. But I didn't care that much since I knew I wasn't going to be in the Guard much longer anyway. I was going to join the army.