

Bethany - Adventures of the Mighty Mustard Seed

Chapter 1

Straying from the Path

All she wanted was a dog – a nothing-special-about-it dog. A mutt would do just fine. Straight from the pound, she didn't care. Bethany wanted one that badly, and she wanted one now! Was that too much to ask? She'd be off to college in just six short years, and, well, her youth was slipping away fast. She hadn't much time left. That's the way she saw it. But it wasn't going to happen: not now, not ever! Her parents had promised her a dog when they moved to Salem City a year ago, but then changed their mind. They gave her a bunch of feeble excuses from time to time. But she didn't buy them, not a single one. She knew the real reason for her dogless home, and, boy, was it pathetic! The family secret – no one would discuss the real problem, but everyone knew. It made her mad sometimes, and often very sad.

But she could daydream about it, which is what she was doing when Mrs. Fanneyspankel announced in her squeaky mouse-like voice, "Bethany, will you please pay attention to your Sunday school lesson? Child, you need to get more sleep at night. You're forever drifting off in our class."

Bethany shook her head to wake herself up. "What Mrs. Fanneyspankel? I was . . . just thinking about things," Bethany said trying to appease her teacher, although today she didn't much care what her teacher thought. She was sick of trying to be nice when she was bored, mad and sad, all at the same time: It was Mrs. Fanneyspankel's fault – no, no, it was her parents fault! They needed to deal with this "dog" problem that was consuming their child! This isn't the way a sixth-grader should be forced to live, she was thinking when her teacher continued.

"Bethany, maybe you can lead us in our next song – Beulah Land. That should wake you up!"

"Oh, great, like I really want to lead the singing," Bethany said under her breath just softly enough not to be heard.

"Well, what about it, Bethany? Lead us," Mrs. Fanneyspankel continued.

Bethany turned to her and said with a forced smile, "All right, let me just clear my throat." Below the surface, Bethany was ready to explode, but had been taught by her mother to act nice until it hurt. Finally, Bethany began the song as she bellowed out in her strongest, full-lung-power, nothing-held-back, church-going voice, "I'm liv-ing on the moun-tain, underneath a cloudless sky, I'm drink-ing at the foun-tain that never shall run dry; O yes! I'm feast-ing on the man-na from a bountiful supply, For I am dwell-ing in Beee-u-laah Land!" Wow, that felt good, Bethany had to admit to herself; singing could be a great stress reliever. And when she was in a good mood, she would readily admit that singing was the best part of Sunday school without question, except for kicking Bobby Barton's chair and watching his face get beet red: OK, just radish red, but her mom always said beet red. (Once her mom had referred to a neighbor who had her totally flabbergasted as "that old cabbage face." Bethany had never quite figured that one out.)

Singing about the cloudless sky of Beulah Land in Sunday school was good on a day like today. It had rained daily for the past two weeks, and while on this April morning the sun was finally shining, Salem City certainly wasn't Beulah Land, Bethany thought. In fact, she was beginning to wonder whether Salem City was really part of the "sunny South." She might as well be back in Connecticut, where she had previously lived. She liked Salem City but, well, Connecticut was where most of her friends were, and she missed them a lot. Moving was hard for a twelve-year-old.

Riding in the car with her parents, her teenage brother, Stopher, and her younger sister, Genny, Bethany reflected on the song she had just sung in Sunday school. “Dad, where is Beulah Land?” she blurted out during a rare moment of silence in the Clarke family’s big sedan. (Mr. Clarke liked to take long automobile trips. He once said that packing people in a car like a can of sardines and hitting the open road was the glue that held the American family together.)

“Beulah Land? Isn’t that the new biblical theme park that opened near here last month?” Dad responded. Dad was an incorrigible kidder. “Yeah, that Noah’s Ark ride there is a real killer! Two children almost drowned on it last week.”

“Be real, Dad!” Bethany said. “I’m serious.”

“I was confused. Forgive me. It’s that new supermarket going up on Charity Road. Has lots of fresh dairy products,” Dad commented with a smile.

“Stop kidding her honey,” Mrs. Clarke interjected. Knowing her husband was on a “roll” and would not easily be diverted, she commented, “It’s symbolic for the Holy Land, I think, dear.”

“What part of the Holy Land?” Bethany inquired, feeling she was making progress.

“Bob, help me out here,” Mrs. Clarke said to her husband.

Happy to be back in the conversation, Bob replied, “Oh yes, Beulah Land includes most of Israel, parts of Palestine, Judea, Samaria and the northwest corner of the Transjordan, or is it the southwest?” Mr. Clarke had a knack of saying just enough to sound almost authoritative, but not quite. Creative chaos was his game. Throw out an idea or a fact or two and let the conversation follow. Bethany had experienced many such discussions with her dad, and she had developed methods to ferret out some semblance of the truth.

“OK Dad,” she said. “What’s the difference between Palestine, Judea and all those other places you just mentioned?”

Stopher decided to get into the act. “Dad, you’re just blowing smoke!”

Mr. Clarke sensed a contest. He knew that he had to be careful here. The family was beginning to gang up on him. He was good at back-pedaling – lots of practice. “It’s quite complicated, but if I had a map, I could easily show you. It all relates back to the twelve tribes of Israel. I’ll get a map out when we get home,” Mr. Clarke said, knowing that this ploy bought him time and that the kids would become involved in other activities and forget all about their inquiry.

“Is Beulah Land in the Bible?” asked six-year-old Genny, remembering her sister’s earlier question.

Mr. Clarke thought for a moment, realizing he had overstimulated the conversation on this subject and had to have a major curve ball to land a strike-out. “Don’t you kids learn anything in Sunday school? You know, the Clarks are supposed to know the Bible. Our great, great grandfather used to carry one in his saddlebag. I’m going to make sure that each of your knapsacks for school has one. And another thing, if you’re not getting a proper religious education, don’t blame me. If it wasn’t for your mother’s bad knee, we’d be Episcopalians!”

“Bob, stop that!” Mrs. Clarke said. “There’s absolutely nothing wrong with my knees.”

“Daddy, why do Episcopalians go to church on Saturday?” Bethany asked.

Mr. Clarke sighed with great relief. His ploy had worked. “No. No! It’s the Seventh-day Adventists that go to church on Saturday!” Dad happily retorted. “Ask your mother why. She used to date an Adventist, you know. Didn’t you Nancy, dear?”

Mrs. Clarke had had enough. "I dated lots of boys, but that doesn't mean we discussed in detail their religious beliefs!" she snipped.

Bethany could tell her mom was ready to call Dad a "cabbage face" when, suddenly, a sound like a small explosion occurred just inside the engine of the car and startled Mr. Clarke so badly that he swerved to one side. His face grimacing, Mr. Clarke gripped the steering wheel tightly as the automobile chugged to a halt by the side of the road.

"Is everyone OK?" Mrs. Clarke then caught her breath before looking around to the back seat to find her three "angels" buckled in safely. Bethany, Stopher and Genny nodded.

With a sigh of relief, Mr. Clarke got out of the automobile to check under the hood. Stopher, not wanting to be left out of the action, bravely marched along side his dad to the front of the car. Bethany slid back into her seat opting to let the guys handle this one.

"Dad, this doesn't look good," Stopher examined the steam rising from the aging "Clarke-mobile."

"Stand back son," Mr. Clarke said while opening the hood to reveal a massive cloud of white smoke.

Sticking her head out the window, Genny attempted to get her dad's attention. "Daddy, I gotta go to the bathroom."

Mr. Clarke could feel the pressure to take charge of the situation. He observed the still-smoking engine meticulously. Although he knew his knowledge of cars was pitiful at best, he didn't want the family to know that he didn't know what to do. They were in an unpopulated stretch of road approximately five miles from Uncle Lot's home. (Lot was Mrs. Clarke's much older half brother who they visited for Sunday dinner every other week.) Mr. Clarke, viewing the engine said, "unfortunately, it looks like the carburetor is hyperventilating to the manifold and this is transfixing the vector shield."

Stopher, looking over his dad's shoulder said, "Dad, are you sure it's not just a busted water hose? I mean, you've some water coming out from over there by the radiator."

Mr. Clarke, not to be outdone, patted Stopher on the head, "I can understand how to the untrained eye it could look that way son, but I can assure you that it's much more complicated than that." "Well," Mr. Clarke continued, "I believe we've got to call the towing company on this one." As he whipped out his mobile phone to make the needed call and the rest of his family piled out of the vehicle, a late model car rounded the bend ahead and pulled over as the driver inside said, "Need help?" For a moment, Mr. Clarke almost told the old man "no," but then realizing that his mobile phone was not working properly, he said "Sure. Thanks. Know anything about engines?"

As the old man got out of his car, Bethany noticed a small Bible in his shirt pocket and a set of keys hanging from his belt. His clothes were soiled in spots, and she could tell he was the "handy man" type. She wondered if he was a custodian for the school they had passed just a few miles back.

Viewing under the hood, the old man got a fix on the problem, saying, "I think I can get to the bottom of this. Let me grab some tools. Got just about anything you can think of in here," he said pointing to the trunk of his car. "Sometimes people don't think to ask," he continued as he collected some tools and tape and went over to the engine. After about five minutes, he said "I'm pretty sure I found the problem," and then returned to his trunk to collect additional tools he needed to complete his task. As he worked, he could overhear the family's conversation. It revolved around Uncle Lot. For the past year, their family had Sunday dinner with him after church – one week his house, next week theirs. He lived in a stately mansion that was surrounded by a small lake. The house topped a lovely forty-acre tract overlooking a delightful meandering

stream. Grazing about the property was a large herd of cows. Lot had recently retired early due to the small fortune he had amassed as a shrewd businessman in the cookie industry.

Bethany's uncle had many pearls of wisdom. He liked to mention his name in his brief sayings. A few of his favorites were: "There's a *lot* of money in cookie dough," or "if you *knead* the dough, *lots* of *dough* will follow" or "*lots* more where that came from." Bethany didn't always understand what her uncle meant, but she heard these "Loterisms" so often that she couldn't help but remember them, even if she found them annoying. The one most revolting to her was, "You know, if I didn't talk a *lot*, I might forget my name. Boy, I've got a *lot* to remember." Lot thought that one was particularly humorous. This repetitive dinner ritual was often tiresome for Bethany and her siblings.

As the family stood along the side of the road, Bethany asked, "Daddy can we keep it short today. I mean, let's not hang around after lunch. Uncle Lot can drive me crazy with all his talking and all that business stuff. Sometimes I just get sick of it!"

"He does talk a lot, doesn't he? But if he didn't, he might forget his name!" Dad teased, trying to get Bethany irritated.

Mrs. Clarke interrupted, "Bob, you're impossible. Don't rib her like that." After a moment of silence, Mrs. Clarke spoke again. "Now, Bethany, your uncle can be trying sometimes, and I must admit I almost never agree with him on anything political. But he is family, and it's important that family stay close. You know, we're really all he has. He doesn't have many friends. And I know he loves you kids. But for some reason, he just doesn't know how to show his affection." (The old man continued to work on the engine as he overheard the conversation.)

"Mom," Bethany added, "I know he is smart on business things. But he's so wrapped up in what he's saying that he hardly knows who we are. And I'm not certain he cares. I think I know why he never married: He couldn't take time out to learn his girlfriend's name!"

"Bethany Anna Clarke," Mrs. Clarke began, "you watch your mouth young lady. You are going overboard and don't know what you're talking about."

"I know enough to know that old codger is the reason that I can't get a dog! And it's not fair! Just because *he* has some little allergy problem, I have to suffer!"

"Yeah," Stopher joined in, "why do we have to have a dog-hair free house just so he can come over to dinner every other week? That's about the only time he ever comes to see us anyway. Why can't we just go out to eat like normal people? And, at his house, I feel like we're in a museum or something."

"Children, that's enough. We've had this discussion a hundred times before. We're already thirty minutes late for dinner and this is going nowhere. Now straighten out and let's get back in this car as soon as it's up and running. And when we get to your uncle's house, please just go inside and behave yourselves. And remember your manners at the dinner table."

Shortly thereafter the old man announced, "It's ready to go. Nothin' major, just needed a bit of work here and there."

Mr. Clarke told the old man how much he appreciated his help and attempted to give him some money, but he refused to take it. "No thanks. Where I'm from, I don't really need it. Thanks just the same." Getting into his automobile to leave, he motioned to Bethany to come over to his car. While the other family members were distracted by Stopher and Genny's argument on who was going to sit by the window, the old man looked directly at Bethany and smiling said, "We all have much to give and much to learn from each other. Share the joy!" Bethany stood silently as the old man started his car and pulled away.

Back on the road, Mr. Clarke said as he continued the drive to Uncle Lot's home, "You know, that was a nice guy who helped us back there. I didn't even get his name. I guess we got tied up in our conversation and forgot to ask. He would be a good person to get to know." Bethany nodded in agreement, continuing to reflect on what the old man had said to her a few moments before.

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It was a typical lunch with Uncle Lot. He was his usual pontificating self – telling more and more stories of successful business strategies, while the other family members attempted to get a word in edgewise. Bethany tried to engage her uncle in a conversation on the benefits that animals can bring to a family.

"Uncle Lot" Bethany started, "you ought to think about getting a pet."

"A pet? You mean like a dog or something?" he responded. Lot was a large man with mammoth hands, hands too large even for his hefty body. And his gruff, booming voice could be intimidating to a young person.

"Yes."

"Why would I do that?"

"It would probably do you some good, being all alone here in this big house," she observed.

"But I don't need a dog. I've got one of the finest security systems money can buy, Bethany. Look around this house. I've got three cameras in this room alone," he said as his enormous hands pointed like pistols to each. "And the rest of the house is covered with them too. Over seventy cameras all together, if you count the ones covering the outside grounds. And my alarm system is so loud that it would wake up the dead! You know, this house is more secure than any castle in Europe, with a moat to boot. You know, it cost me a bundle to create that little lake that surrounds this fort, but when I pull up that bridge at night, I sleep like a baby. And I just dare anyone to swim across that moat with my alligetters guarding the house. Just got those beauties last week!"

Everyone at the table seemed surprised at this statement. Finally, Stopher asked, "Uncle Lot, what's an alli-getter?"

"Son, they're alligators that have the temperament of crocodiles and have been specially bred to live in cold water environments. Took ten years to develop, but I think there's probably a big market for these critters. I understand that they can live outside as far north as New Jersey. I don't know; this could be a good business to invest in. I got to hand it to that Mr. Frugly in Florida. He has really bred some nasty predators." Then Lot paused before continuing, "No, Bethany, I don't need a dog. I got all the security I want. Iron clad. Like Fort Knox." At that moment Uncle Lot pushed himself away from the table, and placed his hands behind his head, leaning back in his chair to enjoy the moment of satisfaction with a house well built to withstand any imaginable type of "intruders" that might lurk outside.

Bethany sat quietly, fuming as Lot had gone on and on about his fortress and not understanding what she meant. "I'm not talking about . . . about your security Uncle Lot. I'm talking about a dog to greet you when you get home and to make you happy! Don't you want something alive to take care of – something cute and cuddly?"

"Bethany," Lot said, as he thought for a moment, "dogs are time-consuming and messy, shedding their fur all the time. You know, if I can't raise them to sell, I really don't see the need. Plus, they could give me a 'lot' of trouble with my allergies. Naw, dogs aren't worth the hassle," he said shaking his head as he spoke. "Let's look at it from the practical side."

Bethany's eyes focused on her uncle as her anger continued to build. Her head began to swim as she thought her body would burst, given the rage bubbling up inside her. Finally, she could hold it in no longer, as she yelled, "Forget practical! I hate practical! And I hate you Uncle Lot! You are as cold-blooded as your stupid alligators!!" Bethany then banged both fists on the dining room table, toppling her ice tea glass, and stood up abruptly, knocking over her chair. She then began to bawl as she exited the room and ran to the front door of the house.

The rest of the Clarke family was frozen in shock. Bethany had never acted so badly before. In a moment, the silence was broken by Genny who began to cry as she ran over to Mrs. Clarke for comfort.

Lot was taken aback for a moment. Finally he said, "Nancy, she shouldn't talk that way to her uncle! And what did I say? I mean what's she talking about?"

"Lot, I'm sorry. I don't know what to say. What she said to you was totally unacceptable. Bethany will be punished, of course. There must be something wrong. I'm really sorry."

The ride home was a quiet one. Before Bethany got out of the car, Mr. Clarke told her to go to her room and wait there while he and Nancy decided on her punishment. Bethany complied, but when her parents came to her room to discuss the matter, things went badly, very badly. She couldn't calm down, and both she and her parents had "words" that were extremely unpleasant. Finally, her parents told her that she was "grounded" for a week, and the only two things she could do outside the house were practice her basketball and go to her friend Allison's house to borrow her science textbook, since Bethany had mistakenly left hers at school on Friday.

As Mr. Clarke sat down to read his newspaper, Stopher followed the children's Sunday ritual of working on homework or reading for an hour after lunch. Bethany was too upset to do either. She paced around in her room and decided she could take no more. She was going to run away! "I'm outta here!" she mumbled to herself. This would show her parents and Uncle Lot! She would return to Connecticut and live with one of her friends who would definitely let her have a dog. As she began to pack her suitcase with the bare necessities, she calmed down a bit and thought about how she could make this long trip. While she may have had enough money to buy a bus or train ticket, she realized that planning such an escape would not be easy. She would have to think it through step by step. "No rush," Bethany thought as she pushed her partially packed suitcase under her bed. "I must act natural so that Mom and Dad won't suspect a thing. Tonight, I'll plan it all out and leave tomorrow after school." She felt better. She was in control – or so she thought.

Bethany finally decided to get some exercise by practicing her basketball so she put on her faded jeans, a pair of sneakers and her favorite violet-colored shirt that her mom had worn years ago. While dressing, Bethany, for some reason, began to think about what the old man on the road had said to her; it rattled around in her brain as she tried to understand it. After tying her last shoelace, she went downstairs and out the back door. Once outside, Bethany worked hard for over forty minutes on her basketball moves as part of her daily ritual at the backyard goal her dad had installed. She was good and getting better every day. Her shirt was a bit worn, perfect for tramping through the woods, which was where she was heading after her practice. Her new friend, Allison, lived in the next subdivision that was separated from hers by a fifty-acre park. While heavily wooded, the park had a narrow, winding path – connecting the two subdivisions – that easily could be followed until mid-summer, when the underbrush became quite thick. Since it was still early spring, Bethany decided to take the cut-through to Allison's house.

The clouds cleared and the sun was shining brightly by mid-afternoon. And while this had been one of the wettest on record, spring was generally magnificent in Salem City. Wild dogwoods engulfed the park with their fresh blossoms, looking for all the world as though tens of thousands of white butterflies had been frozen in mid-flight. Bethany went down to the path, at

first unappreciative of the sunshine that was greeting her. But a few minutes among the dogwood blooms made Bethany almost forget her homesickness for her friends in Connecticut. The path seemed mystical with its beauty. Nearly halfway into the park was a small stream, and on the other side was an old wisteria vine with its enchanting blooms of purple growing up a massive water oak.

Bethany decided that she must take some of these grape-like blossoms to Allison. There was one slight problem with retrieving this prize. The streambed and the path were at the bottom of a steep gorge that she would have to climb to reach the oak tree housing the wisteria. While her parents had always told her never to stray from the path, she felt that this was a prize worth the risk. Besides, she would be able to see it from the top of the ridge, so maintaining visual contact with the path could be argued to be within the “no straying” rule. She hesitated for a moment, thinking through her argument. The purpose of the rule was to keep her from becoming lost. Therefore, she concluded, in her precocious mind, staying within eyesight of the path was technically not straying. “Dad would like such a logical conclusion,” she whispered to herself. “Besides, who could get lost in a fifty-acre park?”

The slope she climbed was slippery, but Bethany crawled up, a toehold here, a toehold there. She grabbed the bases of small bushes to help with her balance. Twice she slipped but caught herself on outreaching tree branches after sliding back a couple of feet. Finally, she reached the top of the ridge where the oak stood majestically. This was an area she had never explored before. The ridge itself was very narrow, probably no more than seven feet at its widest point. And the view of the other side was splendid. Many more dogwoods dotted the sloping terrain, and, at the bottom, a small pond framed by lily pads was alive with waterfowl. At the far end of the pond stood a magnificent cherry bark oak nearly one hundred feet tall. Bethany gasped. It was all too picturesque for words. She wondered whether she should dare tell her parents that she had discovered this “garden of Eden.”

Bethany again focused on her objective – the wisteria blossoms – as fragrant as any flower on earth, she thought. The best blooms were at about seven feet, slightly out of her reach. She looked about, surveying the territory for an instrument to achieve her mission. On the pond side of the ridge, she spotted a short, fat log that was approximately a foot thick. It would be heavy but, if she could roll it over to the tree, she could probably reach the blossoms of her choice. Moving down the ridge so that she was below the log, she began to slowly push it up the embankment. She was within two feet from the top when her foot caught on a dead tree branch on the ground. Suddenly, her hands flew into the air as she frantically tried to grab a limb to steady her balance. Failing to grasp one, she fell to her side and began to cartwheel down the hill toward the pond below. Rapidly tumbling down the slope, she began to scream, realizing she was likely to collide with one of the sharp boulders below. She avoided one, two, three rocks and continued her descent. But the rugged edge of a fourth boulder whacked her head, and her body came to rest – motionless at the bottom of the hill. All became dark and silent.

