

JIMMY

DONALD PROVANCE, JR.

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Jimmy
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This story is a dedication to ALL of the great friends that I have known throughout my life. My hope is that it has done them justice. They deserve nothing less!

D Provance



In a field in the northeastern part of Webster County, that's where it begins. That's where the river begins its life, kicking and squirming its way through the porous layers of red clay, brown dirt, and limestone before finally bubbling up to the surface among the fescue, goldenrod, and other grasses of the field. For the first twenty yards or so of its young existence the river is confused, an erratic, wandering mess of tiny, fingerling pools scattered about the small section and left crying out to the land for aid and comfort. Eventually, the land hears the tearful cries of the newborn stream and gently huddles all of the tiny pools together into one narrow, winding path. This comforts the little puddles immensely and the land, sensing this, continues to protectively gather in more and more of the wet brood while quietly nursing them along the tranquil trail toward downstream.

With its fear subsided, the minute waterway gladly and confidently moves onward through the field, winding and cutting its way like a small plow through the grass and dirt makeup. Now the little creek is at least a couple of feet wide and maybe six inches deep in some places, and as it plows, it begins to expose through its crystal-clear liquid a new base and bottom. Gone is the dirt and grass of its birth replaced with small, red, green, brown, yellow, and gray, gravelly rocks spread out uniformly about and brilliantly marking its route. In some places the small rocks are absent and in their place are flat, holey, cut slabs of gray limestone. Sometimes, like in the summer months, the slab is coated in a green slime, as algae, fed by the nutrients placed upon the field, grows thickly upon the

rock making it a very slippery walk across for humans, or critters. In other places the limestone is in thick, irregular chunks, causing one to wonder how water can even flow through it—but it does, and quite well.

As the little river continues on through the field, the land begins to funnel the infant system into an even narrower domain, and as it does so, it also begins to dramatically drop its gradient. With the drop of the gradient, the young streamlet begins to gain more and more current, more and more power, and more and more confidence. Now the river has grown to a width of several feet and in many places has a depth of almost a foot, and with the emergence of its new size, current, power and confidence it begins to develop a personality with the attitude of halting for nothing, yielding for nothing. At one point, an old elm with its branches waving in the wind like a crossing guard at a walk, attempts to stop the river, but the river pays it no mind, making a hard right and then left at the base of the old centurion exposing its thick, cylindrical fingers as they frantically dig into whatever remaining ground they can reach. At another place, a huge boulder, nearly ten feet in width and five in height, tries to bully the river by sitting rudely in its path in an effort to make it turn and run. The brash toddler, however, has other plans in mind, and not only does it cut around the boulder on both sides, but also cuts underneath it, making a mockery of the seemingly undefeatable brute. As the little waterway pops its head out after splitting the legs of the enormous rock, it then makes a quick spurt to the left and joins its divided parts back into one. It then makes another sharp cut to the right, but as it does, the lay of the creek bottom, in apparent cahoots with the boulder, falls dramatically, sending the river crashing violently several feet onto a totally smooth, flat surface of limestone. As it undauntedly raises itself from the crashing fall, the ornery little creek seems to look back toward the old boulder and shout, “Na, na, nanna, boo, boo! You can’t catch me!” and then continues on.

After a while, the land senses that the newly gained confidence

of the river has become a possible detriment to itself and to others, and so, in a parental way, decides to bring the spoiled youngster under control. The stream, realizing that something is up, makes a bold maneuver to free itself from the loving clutches of its mother. Thinly, flattening itself out among the rocky bottom of the stream bed, the little rascal spreads out as far as it can, covering a span of some fifteen feet in width, and becoming only a few inches deep as it slyly creeps around the chunky rocks to avoid capture. The earth, understanding the irrationality of infancy, quickly counters the move of the little creek by forming steep, V-shaped, super narrow walls of white and gray limestone, forcing its child into the bottom of the ravine where it can easily be collared. The young stream, though, in a last-ditch effort to gain its independence, tries to maneuver to the right to get around the wall, but the bank is too steep and the youngster is sent crashing at least five feet in its deepest part, and makes a slight move onward from the pool. Finally, as if to say, "Enough is enough!" the maternal source surrounds her wandering babe with her petrous arms and gently swallows him up, vanishing him to her rocky bosom.

For a good thirty yards afterward, there is no sign of the river, only a stony path that marks where he should be. Occasionally, for the next ten yards or so, there is a small puddle, a quiet reminder that this is his domain, but no real sign of the waterway, and in fact such disregard is paid to the little river's return that a small dirt road rudely cuts through its rocky pass, a whistle in the road the only indication that any kind of watery source could ever even remotely be present. Then, about twenty yards on down, far enough away that it can't be seen from the road, the path begins to bend sharply to the right, cutting directly into the surrounding forest. It is here that the great mother, feeling that her little one has finally matured enough, decides to re-release the youngster into the open. This time the entrance of the stream into the outer world is magnificent, an eloquent combination of beauty, power, and grace as the glass-clear water from the underground rolls and bubbles from

its opening into a gorgeous white-green wall. Now, the rocks in the middle of the river's bed are not attempted deterrents, but rather a part of the artwork of the stream as they shape and bend the water into breath taking pieces. Now, also, the bed of the stream is deep and the varying colored pieces of gravel even more so define its brilliant route while dark, earthen walls lined with trees, some fallen, some upright, gallantly mark its path. The water is also much deeper and wider. In most places it is consistently over a foot in depth with a width of at least fifteen to twenty, and in many places deeper, light-green pools form, particularly around, old, thick tree roots with their depth great enough that the bottoms are not plainly visible through the pristine, moving water.

As the river continues, it yawns and stretches itself through the forest, gently winding left and right, rippling here, while lazily falling there, as it fully awakens from the brief nap with its mom. River creatures now begin to make themselves known quite frequently upon the banks and in the water of the newborn river. An old, gray, blue heron stands stone still along the green and purple flowered snake grass as it patiently eyeballs a school of chub minnows as they ignorantly swim around its spindly, orange legs. A catfish, with its limp whiskers floating softly through the water in a nearby eddy, also patiently waits, contemplating the move of the heron sending a frightened chub or two in his direction for a nice snack. A slicked-down, brown, mudded otter path leads from the top of a bank mound into the stream bed, while on a log, five or six painted snapping turtles, of varying sizes, quietly lounge just out of the water. Life for the river, and its occupants, is good here, and the river senses it, and loves it, and as it flows it happily smiles and gurgles along securely filled with the faith that its protectors will never allow it harm.

Moving on through the forest, the river makes a move toward the south, and then, just as it reaches the edge of the deepest part of the woods, it makes a steady, gradual bend to the west. Straightening out to full westward position, the river stays this way

for about a mile before making another dip south, and then west again, and then finally begins its major descent to the northwest, which it remains on for about fourteen miles. As the river churns on through this northwestern route, a tremendous transformation occurs not only in its size but also in its character. The river is maturing, and as its banks swell, so does its pride. Along the route no fewer than twenty-six small creeks and streams tie into the river, and with each new admittance to the journey, more and more water is added, more and more flow is created, until the stream is holding such a sufficient source that it can now be considered a primary waterway. This is a designation that the river accepts honorably and will continue to maintain for miles to come.

In a hospital, in the center of Greene County, in the middle of the summer of 1957, that is where I began. That is where I began my life kicking and squirming from my mother's womb and into the patiently waiting arms of that hospital doctor.

My eyes burned and my ears ached as never before when I exited those friendly confines of the comfortable home that my mother had provided for me for the previous nine months. It was like trying to field a fly ball in the sun and taking a high hard one to the batting helmet all at the same time. I tried and tried to fight through those bright lights of that hospital delivery room, but I just couldn't raise my hands to block the rays as they poured down upon my tiny face. Finally, through sheer determination, I was able to make out my receiver down on the other end as he waited in his flat, round, hat, mask and gloves for me to pop out into his waiting arms. At that moment all I could think of was please don't be a curve ball in the dirt. Please be a nice, slow, and easy to handle fastball right down the middle of the plate.

And that noise! It was so loud! The clanging. The mumbling. The confusion in my little head. I just couldn't make out if I had just knocked in the winning run, made a game-saving catch, or possibly

dropped an easy to handle fly ball on the infield. It was all just a jumble of notes, words, and clangs. It was just a mess!

And then came the excruciating pain in my little chest as the pressures converged from exiting that safe and comforting womb, and into that unknown new world. It was the first time that I experienced that horribly frightened time of getting kicked in the breadbasket, and I hated it. I tried and tried to get my breath, but I had no breath to get. I had depended upon my mom to breathe for me for all of those months, and now she was making me breathe on my own! Finally, a few morsels of real air began to fill my baby lungs, and as they did, I began to speak. Having nothing really great to say at the moment, I decided to cry, short and brief at first, and then, as my lungs kept accepting more and more air, I decided to cry more and more until I was in full fledge, serious cry mode. And I am telling you, it felt great! The more I cried, the more my lungs filled with that glorious air, and the more they filled with that air, the more I began to calm down. It felt awesome! It was kind of like that feeling you get when you check the final cut list that the coach has just posted and you realize that you made the team. Yeah, I think it felt that great.

But then the doctors and the nurses, they pulled a fast one on me. For the last nine months I had done everything on my home field. I had eaten, drank, squirmed, kicked, jumped around, everything. Now, all of a sudden, without any warning, reasoning or explanation, I was sent to a new park. At first they wrapped me in some clothes, which was kind of nice because they were really warm, but then they briefly passed me by my mother's smiling face before hurriedly rushing me out to the visitors' locker room. It just wasn't fair! Everyone should get to play their first game on their home field! It just wasn't right, but I had no choice. You just have to play your first game wherever you are scheduled. It's just the way it is.

And the food, it was terrible! I had hoped to at least get to have my first meal from the flesh of the one who carried me for nine

months, but no, I kept getting this rubber thing shoved into my mouth that contained this liquid substance. I didn't care for it at all at first, but eventually I got used to it and I was kind of hungry anyway, so I went ahead and kept sucking. And the more I sucked, the more it filled me up. And the more it filled me up, the more relaxed I felt. And the more relaxed I felt, the more I began to doze off until eventually I had passed out into a deep and comfortable sleep.

After a few hours of sleep, I woke up, still in the visitors' locker room, but I realized that I was surrounded by a bunch of other kids who also had to play their first game away from home. I still thought that it wasn't fair, but it did help me a little knowing that there were others who had to play the same schedule that I did. I could tell that they didn't like it either, but again, we just didn't have any choice.

As I was hanging out in that bassinette that the nurse had put me in, while I was in the locker room, I began to look around, and I noticed that there was this one guy who just kept peering at me through the glass that separated the locker room from the rest of the playing field. I couldn't smell him or feel him to get a really good idea as to who he was, but I just had this feeling that he was special. Oh, there were others who also came around and smiled, and tapped on the glass in front of me and stuff like that, but this guy, I could tell that somehow he was different, and the more he began to show up, the more I began to like it.

As the days began to go by, I gradually got to spend more and more time with my mom on her field. I still had to go back to the visitors' locker room quite a bit, but it was better than it was in the beginning, and I was gladly going to take advantage of whatever I could get. Also, that one special guy kept coming more and more to the glass window outside of the locker room. He would smile and wave and tap on the glass each time and I would smile back at him. I wanted to give him a really good wave back just to acknowledge to him that I appreciated his visits, but I just didn't have really good command of my arms yet. But I did the best that I could, and I think that he really did enjoy that. At least it looked like he did.

It was on about the fifth day that I was at the hospital that things began to really start looking up. First, one of the nurses came in and dressed me up in a really sweet, one-piece uniform complete with this really neat hat. And then, it was the very best thing that had happened to me ever—I got to have my rookie card made! It was really something. It was complete with photo, stats, hometown, I mean everything. I tried to get into a good position for the photo, one that would really show that I would be a force to be reckoned with in the future, and I think that it was okay, but you know how it is, you always think that you could do better in your photos.

What I was the most pleased with, however, was my stats! Name: James “Jimmy” Creekmore. Born: August 4, 1957. Parents: Lewis and Sally Creekmore. Weight: seven pounds and two ounces. Height: twenty-one inches. Hometown: Springfield, MO. I am telling you, it was awesome! My rookie card. How could it get any better?

But it did, and lots. After having my rookie card made, the nurse, instead of taking me back into the visitors’ locker room as usual, took me into my mom’s room. This time, though, I could tell that things were different. This time she was dressed differently and instead of only holding me for a brief while, and then sending me back to be with the other babies, my mother held me tighter, and I could tell that something was really up. The neatest thing, though, was when I looked up and saw that special guy, who had kept visiting me outside of the locker room, walk into the room. I am telling you that I really lit up then. And when he walked over and put his arms around me and my mom, why, I touched all of the bases that day. Yep, I touched them all.

We probably stayed in the hospital just about another inning or so, and then me, my mom and that special guy, we all got into a car and went on a ride. We hadn’t really been in the car that long before we pulled into the parking lot of this new ballpark. I couldn’t get a really good look at it at first, being wrapped up in a blanket, and being in my mother’s arms and everything, but when that special guy came over to our side of the car, and opened the door, and

I saw those beautiful trees outlining that gorgeous, green grass my heart just sang. And I realized immediately that I finally made it. I was finally getting to play ball on my home field. And let me tell you there is no better feeling in the world than to get to play ball on your home field! Nope, there is no better feeling in the world.

For the next ten or eleven months, or so, I played a lot of home games. Every now and then I might have an occasional away game, but for the most part I had a home schedule, and that was very fine with me. We also had a lot of fans drop by and watch my games at that time. I couldn't give them much of a show, since about all I could do was scoot and crawl a little, but each time they showed up, they laughed and acted like they had gotten their money's worth, so I guess I was performing adequately. I guess I figured that if I wasn't playing too well that they wouldn't keep buying a ticket to see me. And some of them just kept coming back and back. I finally got to thinking one day that they must be season ticket holders. And then I got to thinking that I had possibly better be upping my game for them or they might stop attending. At that point I realized that scooting and crawling a little really wasn't going to cut it any longer. If I was going to keep these fans coming back to the ballpark I was going to have to show them that I had talent and that I was worth the price of an admission ticket, or a season ticket, whichever the case might be. I decided that I just needed to go for it. I figured that if you're too afraid to pick up the bat, then you're never going to get a hit. You know, you might strike out, but at least you'll go down swinging.

With that, I crawled over to the couch where the special guy was sitting. He was sitting next to this other man who looked a lot like the special guy except that he was quite a bit older. I kind of figured that he was probably a special guy too. Anyway, I crawled over to Special Guy, and Special Guy Too, and I grabbed onto Special Guy's leg, and I started to pull myself up. It was a little tough at first, but once I got my legs moving and up and under me it got a lot easier. Now, I had done this stunt several times before, so it

really wasn't any big deal. It always seemed to be a crowd-pleaser, but I was really wanting to do something awesome, something that would make them want to keep coming back again and again to the old ballpark.

As I was standing there holding Special Guy's fingers, an idea suddenly flashed through my mind. I always noticed that Mom, Special Guy, and all of the other fans never crawled anywhere. They always walked to wherever they wanted to go. Whether it was the bleachers, to the field, to the locker room, wherever they wanted to go they always walked. *That's it, I thought. If they can do it, so can I!*

Feeling like the time was right, I turned a little to my left and faced my mom. I was still holding Special Guy's finger with both of my hands, but as I turned, I gently and smoothly released my left hand from Special Guy's. This was a new move on my part, but still not good enough for this crowd. Suddenly, and without thinking much about it, I turned more to my left, and as I did so, I completely released the grip that I had on my right hand.

Holy mackerel! I thought, having never been to this point before. *What do I do now?!*

I was standing, still within reach of Special Guy, and facing my mom, but I couldn't move. I was paralyzed. It was kind of like that feeling you get when you get your very first hit. You're so surprised that you just stand there too shocked to move. Finally, I gained control of my senses and began to plan my next move. I was really wobbly, but I noticed pretty quickly that if my body moved one way I could counteract the move with a slight move in the other direction.

This is alright, I thought. This just might work.

With that, I picked up my left leg just a little bit and moved it toward my mom. Then I picked up my right leg and moved it also toward her. I was really wobbly, but that counterbalance thing was working well, and I was moving right along toward my mom. I wasn't sure how well I was doing, but I noticed that the room all of

a sudden became very quiet. It was kind of like when it's the bottom of the ninth, bases loaded, two outs and a full count on the batter, and everyone is too afraid to speak. It was kind of like that. But I didn't let it distract me. I just kept going.

And then, I guess I must have driven in the winning run or something, because all of the fans in the room including my mom, Special Guy and Special Guy Too, they all began to cheer. Oh man, was it something! They picked me up, tossed me around, slapped me on the back and kissed me like you wouldn't believe. Yep, I had to have knocked in the winning run, and it felt great!

From that day on, every time I could, I was walking. I was still wobbly at times, but for the most part I was moving like you wouldn't believe, and I loved it. Walking and running became the most important things to me, and the more I could do it, the more mobile I became. And I happened to notice that the more mobile I became, the more things I got to do with Mom and Special Guy. They were always introducing me to all sorts of new stuff just like they did. When we ate dinner, or breakfast, or whatever at our home field, I got my own plate just like theirs, and my own chair pretty much like theirs. And every now and then we would go on an away trip and we would go get ice cream. I would sit in the front seat with Mom, and Special Guy would drive, and when we got to that ice cream place, I would get my very own cone just like Special Guy's. I would always let Mom hold it, of course, because my hands and arms weren't quite big enough yet, but it was still mine all the same.

We also got to go to neat new ball parks every now and then. My favorite was always the river. I just loved that place. Mom would bring a big blanket and we would spread it out on our favorite spot right by the edge of the water. The river there was really slow and shallow, and so they would always let me step in, but just up to my little ankles. And then, while I was there, I would pick up rocks and throw them. Man, did I have an arm. I bet I could hurl those stones a good three feet. I just knew that with an arm like that, it wouldn't be long before I was playing in the bigs.

And the food that Mom would bring on those trips, it was simply incredible! I don't know what secret ingredient that Mom added to peanut butter and white bread, but when she brought it to the river, it just tasted better. And her chocolate chip cookies! I am telling you, at the river they would absolutely make you cry, they were that good. Yep, the river was just an awesome place.

One of the funny things about the river, though, was that I guess it would make Mom feel cold. I figured that that must be the case, because almost every time we would go there, Special Guy would put his arms around her, and hug her to warm her up. I couldn't understand why she wouldn't just bring a sweater or something, and apparently she didn't mind much, because he was constantly warming her up, but personally it began to kind of annoy me. I mean, come on, Mom, figure it out! If you're always cold bring a jacket, or a towel, or something. Don't expect Special Guy to have to keep you warm with his hugs all day. For goodness' sake, how am I going to learn to throw my good pitches with these rocks if he's constantly having to keep you warm? Come on, you've got to be more considerate of me and my needs!

Well, one day we were at the river, and I was really having some problems with my grip on the rocks. I just couldn't get a hold of them right, and I was really needing some help. I just couldn't get any distance at all on my throws, and it was getting pretty frustrating. Finally, after a really bad toss, I turned around to get Special Guy's attention because I really needed some tips, and there he was hugging Mom again to keep her warm. That was it. I just lost it, and I turned toward them and just started babbling angrily. I had no idea what was coming out of my mouth because I hadn't learned to speak yet, but it must have been something good because it really got Mom's and Special Guy's attention. They just kind of turned toward me and smiled and then they looked at each other and smiled some more. And then they really began to act weird.

Looking at me and then turning and pointing to Special Guy, Mom said, "Da da?"

What? I thought.

And then she did it again. “Da da?”

What in the world are you doing? I thought.

Again Mom repeated, “Da da?”

Now, don’t ask me why, but something inside me made me want to repeat it back to her, and without even thinking about it I blurted out, “Da da!”

Special Guy beamed like I had never seen him beam before. Whatever I had done, it was obviously a hit.

Again I squawked out, “Da da!”

And again he beamed.

That time, I think I hit a double, I thought.

One more time I hollered, “Da da!”

And with that he picked me up, tossed me around with the biggest smile that I had ever seen on his face and he said, “Yes! Da da! Yes! Da da!”

At that moment, I realized that I had hit a home run. And from that time on, even though he was still special to me, he was no longer Special Guy, but Dad.