

# CHASING EARL CAMPBELL



**Bruce David Tracy**

It hadn't started out as a day that was going to distinguish itself in any way. The sky was wrong, not quite angry, but in no way pleasant either. Unless actual rain was falling from the sky, and falling hard, my mom wasn't going to load my bike into the back of the station wagon and drop me off at school. I loaded the important stuff into my backpack (two Twinkies, a pile of baseball cards to trade with Mac during lunch, and the history report for Mr. Shelly which was already a week and a half late). After pulling my bike out of the side door on the garage, I checked the sky one more time just in case it had decided to cut me a break and start dropping water before my mom left for work. No dice.

It wasn't that I didn't like riding my bike. I did. I just didn't like watching storms raging outside the windows of math class knowing that in a few hours I would have to be out in it riding back home. With the wet return trip still on my mind, I pulled into the bike racks where Mac was already waiting for me.

"Where have you been?" By the way that he was rocking on his heels, I could tell that he either had to pee real bad or he had some news that couldn't wait until lunch.

I slipped off my backpack, pushed my front tire in the bike rack, and locked it. I was taking my time on purpose. I could tell he had big news, but I was going to make him wait just a little longer. He continued rocking and finally he couldn't hold it in any longer. "You know Perry Ellison, right?" I must have had a blank look on my face because he continued. "Come on, you know him. He's that kid who always wears that lime green Alligator shirt. He's in your English class."

Of course I knew who he was. Lime green isn't a color that you easily forget, and the fact that he wore it twice a week made him that much more memorable. "I know who he is ... what about him."

We started walking to class because the first bell had rung. "Do you remember his older brother who used to play football for Kempsville? I nodded and he continued. "He's now a janitor at the Holiday Inn over on Atlantic." He kept looking at me as if I should know where he was heading with all of this.

"... and?"

“And last night Perry called to tell me that his brother saw Earl Campbell walking into one of the rooms there yesterday.” With that he had completed his story, all one sentence of it and then he just smiled waiting for the response that he knew was on its way.

The full meaning of this information took a few minutes to fully sink in, so I said nothing at first. “Dude, did you hear me? The Tyler Rose ... the greatest living running back is staying right here in Virginia Beach. Right this minute, he is sleeping less than three miles away from where we are standing.”

It didn't matter that I wasn't a Houston Oilers fan. It really didn't even matter if I was a huge Earl Campbell fan. The point was that one of the greatest athletes in the world was staying in our hometown and we would be less than the sports obsessed American boys that we thought ourselves to be if we did anything less than get an autograph from this man before he left town.

I looked at him ... he looked at me ... we knew what we had to do. “I'll meet you here after school.”



Sure enough the rain did come, and by the end of the day it was falling hard. We unlocked our bikes in silence with our jackets thrown over our heads as if that would keep us dry. Once we were on the road, we started working on our plan. The streets were puddling up and the passing cars threw waves of water on us as they went past. We didn't care; we were as focused as the Tyler Rose when a hole opened up between two lineman. We pedaled hard and fast and soon the bright green neon of the Holiday Inn sign was gleaming through the wet haze. It was a thing of beauty, a building worthy of temporarily housing a man as great as Earl Campbell.

Ellison had told Mac that his brother had seen Earl entering a room on the third floor across from the janitor supply closet. That was all of the information we had, and much more than we actually needed. If Earl was in this building; if he was anywhere with a mile of this building, we would find him.

As I was locking our bikes up to a newspaper stand out front, Mac walked straight into the lobby. Nowhere in the plan that we had just made did we discuss walking into the lobby. We were going to first look for a fire escape with ladders and sneak in. It wasn't necessary, but the added challenge of sneaking in made the plan seem much more dangerous. James Bond would have never walked right into the lobby.

By the time I made it into the hotel, I knew we were in trouble. Mac was at the front desk talking to a very serious lady with her hair tied in a tight bun on the top of her head. She already looked annoyed. “Why would Earl Campbell be staying here? Someone has given you some bad information young man.”

My heart skipped a beat. We already knew he was staying here, so why had he gone to her? I quickly walked over to the desk. Mac was actually dripping on her paperwork and there was a puddle forming at his feet on the nice tile floor. The Holiday Inn was all class and at that moment we were anything but. “We were told ...,” I didn’t let him finish his sentence, grabbed him by the arm, and started pulling him away from the desk.

“We’re sorry; we just thought we saw someone that looked like him walking in here.” I continued pulling him toward the front door.

Once outside, I gave him a hard look, but he still didn’t have a clue. “What was that all about?” He would have been angry if he hadn’t been so confused.

“What are you thinking? We don’t need for her to tell us if he is here!” I, on the other hand was a little angry. Mac was already going against the plan. “At least we now know for sure that he is staying here.”

“How did you get that?” He still looked confused.

“Think about it.” The rain had let up a little but we were still getting wet, so I started walking toward a door on the side of the building (there weren’t any fire escapes that we could access from the ground, so plan B would have to do). Once we were in the hallway I continued. “No woman who looks like that would have any idea who Earl Campbell is. The fact that she even knew who you were talking about tells me that she knows who he is because he is in fact staying here.”

“Dude, you’re a genius.” The excitement of the adventure kicked in once again as we jogged up the stairwell to the third floor.

The janitor’s closet was right next to the stairwell and directly across from it was room 307. It was our Mecca and we weren’t sure what to do, so we just stared at it. At least thirty seconds passed before I finally said something without taking my eyes off of the door. “Now what?”

“You knock, I talk,” his eyes were locked on the door as well. I knocked on the door quickly and then stepped back. Nobody answered. I knocked again a little more forcefully, but still the door stayed closed.

“I guess he isn’t here.” Mac started down the hall toward the elevator end. “Let’s get a drink and think this thing through.” I followed him to the soda machine on the far side of the elevators. As we sat leaning against the wall with our drinks, I heard the elevator open and then a familiar voice.

“Oh, they will show up eventually. Kids are like cockroaches. It doesn’t matter how many times you chase them away, they always come back. Be sure to check this hall every ten to fifteen minutes to make sure they don’t pester him.” Her voice trailed off as they walked down the hall toward room 307. I leaned out from behind the soda machine and watched as the bun from the front desk and an older man in a bellhop uniform walked away from us.

“So now they’re watching for us,” I whispered as I took another sip from my soda and leaned back into the wall. Having lost the excitement of the fire escape part of the plan, I was secretly happy that we at least now had a tangible enemy.

“We still need that autograph,” Mac looked a little worried, not yet realizing that the challenge would make the autograph mean that much more. “How about I streak through the lobby and get them to chase me. While they are after me, you run up here and get autographs for both of us.”

I was impressed. He actually had a plan, but Virginia Beach wasn’t quite ready to see his naked white backside running loose. “Or,” I added, “We could simply wait here until the old guy passes through next time. We’ll have ten to fifteen minutes once he leaves.”

“I like your plan better.” And with that, Plan C was born.



We waited for three passes and timed the space between each to get a feel for the old man’s pattern. The shortest break between passes was ten minutes and the longest was thirteen. His routine was the same for all three passes. He would exit the elevator, walk down the hall, stop briefly by the door of room 307 as if paying respect to the Tyler Rose, and then walk down the stairs. When he disappeared down the stairwell for the third time, Mac made his move. I stayed behind to finish off my second soda and had just tossed the can in the trash when I heard one too many voices coming back toward me. The first voice was Mac.

“Excuse me sir,” his voice was confident ... a good sign. “Your machine just ate my quarters.” There was a pause, and then finally the second voice.

“Which machine?” Footsteps moved in my direction and I pressed myself against the wall. The old bellhop must have turned around and come back up the stairs. The next time I heard Mac’s voice, it was only a few feet from where I was hiding.

“This one right here.” Mac was on his game now. He had wisely picked a candy machine that was just far enough away to keep me out of eyesight. The old bellhop knew he was looking for two kids. As long as I was out of eyesight, we were ok.

I could hear the man fiddling with the machine. “I don’t know kid. It looks ok to me. I don’t have any change on me. Meet me down at the desk and I’ll get you fifty cents.”

“Cool. I am going to have to let my mom know. I’ll be down in a minute.” There were no voices for a couple of minutes and then I heard the elevator door open and close again. “He’s gone.”

I stepped out and tried to even my breathing. “Now you’re the genius. That was nice.”

“We gotta get this done. When I don’t show up down there, he’ll be back pretty quick.”

We hurried back to room 307, and again temporarily froze in front of it. “Go ahead and knock,” Mac nodded toward the door. I stepped up and gave the door three solid strikes. I stepped back behind Mac and waited. We could hear footsteps behind the door and my heart climbed its way back into my throat.

The door opened and a tall black woman appeared. She had a famous look to her, with dark hair and perfect dark skin. I waited for Mac to say something ... and waited.

“Can I help you boys?” Even her voice was cool.

Sensing that Mac had hit the wall, I stepped up and stammered, “Is this where Mr. Campbell is staying?”

“Yes it is.”

With that, Mac found his voice. “Mr. Earl Campbell?”

She smiled as if it was a normal thing for two white kids to show up at her hotel door and ask inane questions. The smile was as beautiful as the face. “Yes.”

I waited for Mac to add something, but when he looked down at his feet, I realized he was finished. I quickly added, “Do you think we could maybe get his autograph?”

“Wait here.” Another smile and she closed the door behind her. My heart was still beating twice as fast as it should have been. When the door finally opened again, she was

standing there with two football cards for us. Each one had the same thing written on it: *Peace and Love, Earl Campbell*. She handed them to Mac who was still speechless, smiled, and started to close the door behind her. Finally, he made his move. He threw his foot in front of the door just before it closed and leaned in as close to it as he could. “We love you Earl!” was what finally came out of him.

After a pause of a few seconds, we heard a voice from the back of the room. “I love you too kids.” Mac’s foot slid out from the doorjamb and it closed the rest of the way.

The only thing that could have possibly got us to move away from our new shrine at that moment was the sound of the steps coming hurriedly down the hall. It was the bun and the old bellhop and they weren’t happy. I took off toward the stairs; Mac was already three steps ahead of me. He beat me to the bikes and had them unlocked before I got there. We peddled hard as if there was any chance that they were going to follow us.

The rain had stopped, but it was cold. I may not have seen the greatest living running back, but I heard his voice and saw the smile of his woman. It was one of those moments as a child when you feel like no matter how long you live, you will not achieve anything else so great. For the rest of the ride home, I was temporarily immortal ... I was unstoppable ... I was, for the briefest of moments, the Tyler Rose.



*This story is loosely based on a childhood experience of Billy Cannon, a family friend.*