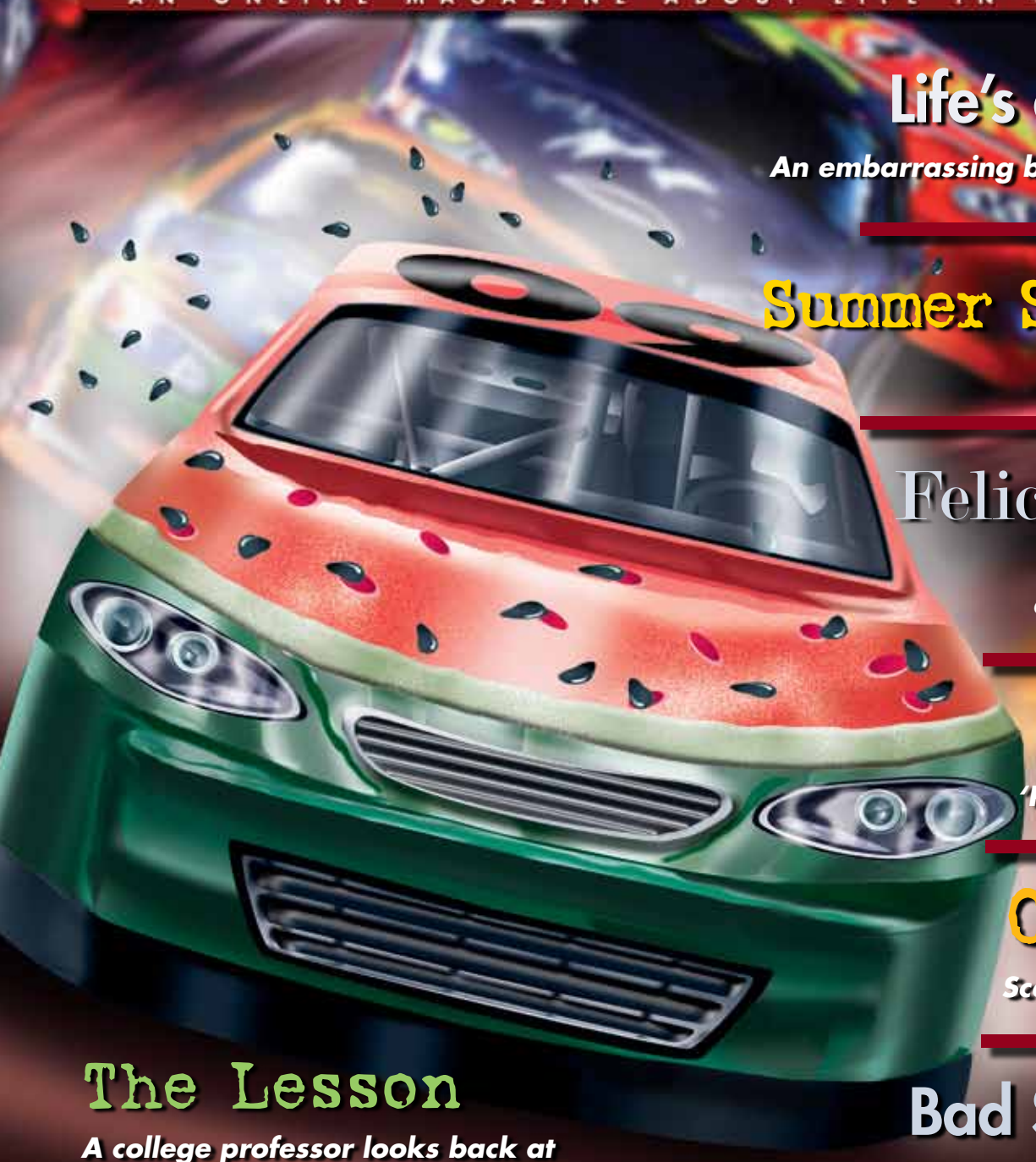


Issue Number Twelve | Summer/Fall 2009

Southern Reader

AN ONLINE MAGAZINE ABOUT LIFE IN THE SOUTH



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David Skinner

Potatoes, Martians and Cascading Realities

Many years ago I met the late Dinah Shore one crisp Autumn afternoon at a Doubleday cocktail party in Manhattan. At the time, I was Art Director of their *Literary Guild* magazine, and we were spotlighting her latest cookbook.

She was nibbling on some sort of frou frou potato puff pastry (okay—I was, too), and we were discussing the *Guild's* treatment of her book. I knew that she was raised in Tennessee, so I mentioned that I also had grown up in Nashville. She seemed pleased to hear a familiar Southern accent and her eyes lit up as she took my hand. “We might be kin!” she laughed.

“You may be right,” I said, “After all... here in New York, everyone thinks that all Southerners are related...that *cousins-marrying-cousins* business. I don't think they quite understand us...we may as well be from Mars as from Tennessee.”

She laughed again and asked, “What brought you up here to New York?”

“*Cascading accountabilities*,” I said without thinking, trying to appear at least semi-Cosmopolitan and yet, at the same time, giving myself a moment to come up with something more intelligent-sounding. Actually, Doubleday had just put me through a painful week of sessions called “Cascading Accountabilities,” the gist of which was the importance of making all my deadlines. At the end of the week the only things I came away with were the fact that the sessions had put me a week behind making my magazine deadlines, and a keen respect for the word “*ironic*.” As for my conversation with Dinah, she smiled, but she clearly looked puzzled.

Mercifully, an editor swooped in and squired her away before I could somehow explain myself, or, for that matter, dig myself a deeper hole.

Over the years, however, as I reflected on the various blocks of my life, I finally figured out what I was trying to say to Dinah Shore; it's just that at

to develop and hone my homemade theory of cascading realities, but when it's all said and done, it's really a pretty simplistic observation. I've come to understand that one's past is made up of different virtual tectonic plates, each one merging—or, cascading, if you will—into the next one, and together they make up the patchwork quilt of your life. I believe that most of the time, the reality block in which you're currently living (some would call it the present) merges slowly into the next one, effortlessly, with the great-

est of ease. However, it's also possible that your next reality won't be a gentle fade at all; it could be a drastic, possibly explosive, converging reality (see “*Darwin Awards*”).

Back during the time of the Doubleday cocktail party, my virtual tectonic reality plates were cascading every four or five years. For example, four years before my tenure at Doubleday, the idea of me sipping white wine, chewing on potato puffs and exchanging pithy comments with renowned authors and former TV stars was inconceivable. I didn't even own



I believe that most of the time, the reality block in which you're currently living merges slowly into the next one with the greatest of ease.

the moment of that Doubleday cocktail party, I was simply outrunning my headlights. Actually, that was pretty typical of my slab of reality at the time. I knew that there was *something* that was cascading, but it took me a little more time to realize that it was *realities* as opposed to *accountabilities*. We are, I suppose, accountable to our various realities; maybe *accountability* and *reality* are first cousins, at least here in the South.

At any rate, it took me decades of collecting stories and experiences

a suit; my formal attire was torn jeans, scuffed-up sneakers and a rock 'n' roll t-shirt. Then again, I was art directing and drawing cartoons for *Record World* magazine. Inspired by Al Hirschfeld's clever knack of hiding his daughter Nina's name in his cartoons, I started hiding potatoes in mine for absolutely no reason at all. For example, when the band, Kansas had a hot album on the charts, I did a cartoon of Dorothy from “The Wizard of Oz” having her guitar taken away by a roadie, with the band looking on. She was saying,

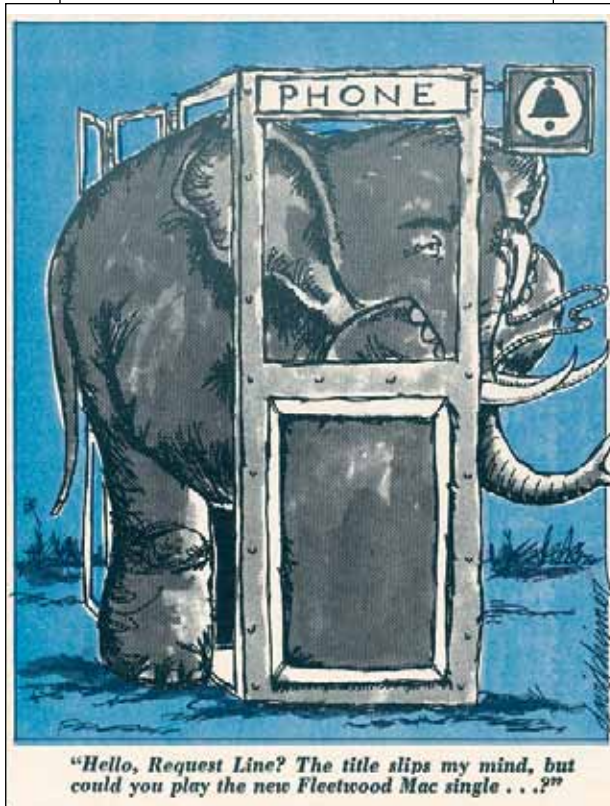
"Well, Toto, I guess we're not in Kansas anymore." (The band, *Toto* was also charting at the time.) And, Dorothy had potatoes on her dress. In another cartoon, an Elvis impersonator had a potato hidden on his belt buckle. In yet another one, an elephant in a phone booth had a potato hidden in the folds of his knee. He was trying to remember the name of *Fleetwood Mac's* latest single from their album, "Tusk."

Around this time (it was the early '80s), I got a call from Randy California from the band, *Spirit*, and he invited me to see the band perform at the Bottom Line, a quintessential small-concert venue down in NY's Greenwich Village. I was excited...he had written one of my all-time favorite songs from the sixties, "I Got a Line On You." When I showed up at the club's ticket window, they waved me on through, telling me, "Randy wants to see you backstage."

Wow, I thought, I could ask him how he came up with that swell progression that thousands of garage bands had imitated for the past dozen years. When I found the dressing room door, Randy ushered me in, telling me they had to be onstage in about a minute. "So," he said to me as he pulled the curtain back to lead the band onstage, "What about those potatoes?" I'm pretty sure it was a rhetorical question, but it did give me pause (no animal puns, please...it was strictly a *tuber question*) to consider my reality that night. All I could think about is when I took a train through Idaho's stovepipe on my zig-zaggy way to California (the state, not the rocker) in the mid-'70s. Maybe I should have paid more attention when I visited the potato state, I thought. But, that was a totally different time, place, and virtual tectonic plate, and I had not yet developed my incredible cascading realities theory.

As for the train ride through Idaho, it had been merely a means to an end, the end being hitching down the west coast from Portland to L.A. My companion on the train was my old guitar; I spent most of the time in the "sky-

car" watching the mountains and playing everything from "Someone's in the Kitchen With Dinah/I've Been Working (playing, actually) on the Railroad" to "I Got a Line On You," and occasionally, "Uneasy Rider." My traveling set list depending on the fellow passengers in attendance at the time. But, as hip as I thought I was at the time, my vintage smoking jacket, elephant bell-bottomed Levi's and thrift store Stetson would have gotten me laughed out of the Bottom Line's backstage area a mere five years later. It was, after all, a



"Hello, Request Line? The title slips my mind, but could you play the new Fleetwood Mac single . . .?"

totally different reality.

In fact, that hitching part of my life consisted of sliding realities; out of necessity, I became a *reality chameleon*, forced to adapt to the person or persons plucking me off the side of the road. When the cowboy in the blue '64 Cadillac who had picked me up just south of Portland started singing along with the Moe Bandy country song, I was the kid from Nashville who knew Doodle Owens, the writer of the song (his son, Lee Owens eventually became my songwriting partner). That got me an extra 50 miles on down the road. When the eclectic filmmaker picked me up just outside San Francisco (with lights, cameras and microphones in the

bed of his pickup), I was the former "*aesthetics of the film*" student, discussing the *epic vs. the evil* of Griffith's "Birth of a Nation." That discussion got me all the way into L.A.

However, my chameleon skills were stretched to the limit when the five rednecks in a stationwagon (remember those?) picked me up on the outskirts of a little town. Judging by their outfits, I figured they were on some sort of hunting or fishing trip, but when I started talking about fishing on the Tennessee River, they started becoming belligerent. "Hey, hippie-boy, once we get a-rolling real good," they menaced, "We're gonna push you out to see how far and fast you roll! What you think of that?"

"I think you'll never get to hear me speak Martian," I replied, trying desperately not to panic.

"What you mean 'speak Martian'?" they asked, confused.

" $\Delta\Omega=\zeta\sqrt{\mu-\Delta f\omega\sum \dagger\ddagger\%*\approx\hat{A}\Delta -\hat{a}\beta\delta\approx f!!!}$ " I said. For a second their mouths hung open like baby birds; then they started guffawing, slowly at first, but then building to a hillbilly crescendo. The driver had tears in his eyes and had to pull over at the light. I was out the door and down the next block before they stopped laughing...and I didn't slow down until I reached the bus station.

These days, my block of reality is quite a bit tamer. I live in the suburbs and go to high school football games and cub scout meetings, and I coach my son's church league basketball team. However, every once in awhile, a blip on my life's radar screen reminds me of virtual blocks of realities from days gone by.

For example, few years ago, my sister, Jann, her husband, Lance and I were all guests of the Grand Ole Opry, and we were invited to sit up onstage (the back of the stage, actually) during the various segments. Jann and I had recorded a jingle for King Syrup called "*Shoo Fly Pie*," and it was airing for a number of weeks. King Syrup is the major ingredient in Shoo Fly Pie, so we thought it only made sense to write something about one of the

happy by-products of the syrup. I knew that Dinah Shore had a hit with a song called "Shoo Fly Pie" back in the '50s, but it didn't mention King Syrup, so, like baking a pie, I wanted to start from scratch. Our contact at the Opry had told us, prior to our trip up to Nashville, that the Charlie Daniels Band would be one of the acts performing the night of our visit. I printed off a couple of my *Record World* cartoons that featured Charlie (even though only one of them had potatoes hidden in it) and gave them to him backstage. He seemed pleased. "I remember *Record World*," he said.

After the jingle played, the Opry announcer commented on it. "Shoo Fly Pie," he said, "Dinah Shore had a big hit with another 'Shoo Fly Pie' and I saw some of you in the audience singing along with this one. What is *Shoo Fly Pie* anyway? Some kind of hidden meaning, I guess. Speaking of hidden... where's that Tater?"

It was just his way of introducing Little Jimmy Dickens, who walked out onstage to the opening chords of "Take a Cold 'Tater and Wait," but I was pleased to sit back from my vantage point of the back of the Opry stage and watch the realities cascade. At one point during the song, Jimmy turned and winked at us. The only thing that would have made the evening more perfect would have been if he just would have sung the last verse in Martian. However, from what I know about that alien species, and from what my sources tell me, no self-respecting Martian would lower himself to wait on a potato, nor with a potato...much less a cold one.

David Skinner

SouthernReader

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Life's a Beach, and Then You *(fill in the blank)*

a childhood excerpt by Lisa Love

Summertime and the beach just go together—can't think of one without the other! However, there is one Summer memory that stands tall above all of the others.

The Summer of 1978 had started out with such promise; I was 17 years old, the weather was hot, and we were planning our annual summer trip to St. Petersburg, Florida. Every year my parents rented a place on the beach for about ten days, and that summer was no exception. As usual, though, there was a little fly in my ointment. The week

before we were scheduled to leave for Florida, my sister, Debbie, had sent me an SOS call; she was starting a new job and could I please keep the kids for a week until she found permanent childcare? Being the good sister that I was, my first response was, "Uhm-m-m-m...NO!" Deb's kids at that time were 7, 5, and 3 years old, and though

I adore them now, back then, mutual toleration might best describe our relationship. I was a teenager; they were messy, germ-laden children... 'nuff said. My mind quickly changed when Mom agreed that I could take a friend with me to St. Pete IF I helped my sister. Bribery? Manipulation? You betcha, but both are a Mama's prerogative, and they worked beautifully. I agreed (sur-rendered?) to her terms.

As with anything I set my mind to, I attacked this "Auntie Daycare" with great gusto. I made lists, brought craft supplies and planned activities—real-

ly, how hard could it be watching three kids? (Ah, the ignorance and arrogance of youth!) I had planned special projects and outings to appeal to each one of them and their varied interests. Bill, 7, was my little “Professor”—he was so certain that he already knew more than any three adults combined. He could grate my nerves till my right eye twitched—but I adored him! Heather, 5, suffered from middle-child syndrome. She was sullen and petulant if she was with her siblings, yet delightful and charming when we were alone together. She thrived with one-on-one attention and during those moments would reward you with a flash of her dimples! That leaves my little Missy, 3—the baby with the perpetual pacifier plugging her piehole! She didn’t speak till she was 5 (didn’t need to, she had the pacifier!); I had it pretty easy with her—she was and is, an angel on earth. So, with personalities analyzed and my lists, graphs and charts at the ready, I set out to show the world how this babysitting thing should be done!

On my first morning there, I told my sister that I planned to take the kids to Red Top Mountain for a little fun in the sun. Red Top was about 10 miles from their house, and it was more than a mountain; it also featured a man-made lake surrounded by a sandy beach. Okay, maybe it wasn’t in the same world-class beach category as those wonderful stretches of sand in St. Pete, but I figured it would work as a consolation prize to distract my charges that hot summer day. Our family had often gone there together for picnics and swimming, and Deb agreed that a “trip to the beach” would be lovely. As she left for work with a wave and a smile, I could have sworn that I heard her mutter, “Good Luck!” under her breath, but, good sport sister that I was, I waved back as she backed out of the driveway.

I made sandwiches for our picnic lunch, and then got the kids out of bed. After a healthy breakfast, (I could

really be good at this mothering thing!) I fed their dog and cleaned the kitchen while they watched cartoons. This was gonna be a piece of cake!

Hold that thought! Bill ran into the kitchen screaming, “Wisi, come quick and see the new trick I taught Wisk.” As I followed Bill into the living room, I watched the dog scooting her furry bottom across the carpet from one end of the room to the other. I highly doubted this was a newly acquired skill of Wisk’s; I leaned down beside her to take a closer look. How do I put this delicately? Coming out of Wisk’s backside was a furry green thread—and it was driving that poor dog crazy. I wanted to help her, but didn’t actually want to, well, touch...ANYTHING!!

As quick thinking has always been

The long green thread just kept coming out of Wisk...like scarves from a magician's sleeve.

my forte, I dashed into the kitchen and came back wearing Platex rubber gloves, swim goggles and wielding barbecue tongs in my left hand. Telling the kids to back away and close their eyes, I “tonged” the thread and started to pull...and pull...and pull. And pull and pull and pull! The long green thread just kept coming out like scarves from a magician’s sleeve! I was both appalled and yet, oddly fascinated at the same time by the never-ending string—whose color, by the way, strongly resembled that of the indoor/outdoor carpet on my sister’s porch. After extracting about 13 yards of the endless yarn from Wisk—enough to knit a car cover for my ’74 Pinto (don’t laugh, she was a sweet ride!)—I was startled by an urgent knocking at the back door. Who/what in the world...?!

Heart pounding, I jumped up from my doggie ministrations and threw open the door to find Joan, a friend of Debbie’s, looking decidedly worse for wear. As she burst into the house followed by a gaggle of children, I noticed she was frantic. “Where’s Debbie?”

she breathlessly asked, but then she answered her own query with, “Oh yeah, the new job, right?” As she paced to and fro, she proclaimed, “Well Lisa, I need a huge favor and you will just have to do.” Obviously, Joan had not taken notes during Southern Etiquette and the Art of Asking Favors 101! She told me she needed to leave her daycare children with me while she rushed her mother-in-law to the doctor. Wait a minute...her daycare children?

I had always been slightly bemused that the state of Georgia let Joan keep her own children, much less tend to anyone else’s in her home. Joan thrived on chaos and disorder. Does that sound mean? Well, here was a case in point. She had now been standing in Deb’s house for about five minutes while the six—no, make that seven, kids she brought in, plus my three nieces and nephews—chased a scared, barking dog with a skein of green yarn coming out of her backside all the while I was talking to her wearing the

aforementioned Playtex rubber gloves, swim goggles, and holding barbecue tongs...AND SHE HAD NOT BATTED AN EYELASH!!! I could only assume that this was just everyday fodder at her house. She did finally look around long enough to mutter that it seemed I had quite a houseful. DUH! I did now, I thought to myself.

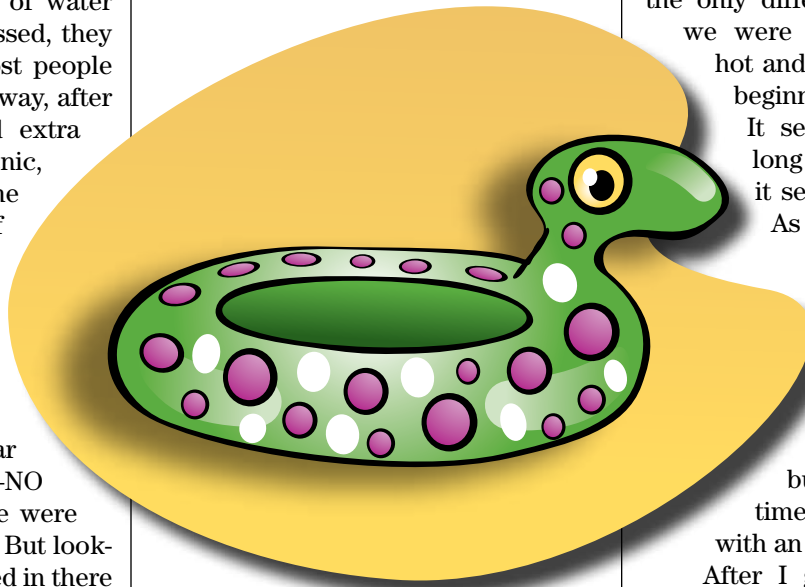
Nevertheless, it was an emergency, and she was my sister’s friend, so I mumbled a pitiful, “Okay, I guess.” I then managed to squeak out that I had planned to take the kids to the lake that morning, wherein she piped up that she had assorted swim suits in a bin in the back of her stationwagon. Great! I had kinda hoped against hope that the idea of a 17-year-old girl taking TEN young children to the beach might have given her pause! Nope! She just ran out to her car and brought back the bin-o’-suits, shouting a quick, “I’ll see you when I see you” over her shoulder and she was off.

Feeling a wee bit flustered, I stood and observed the bedlam that Joan left in her wake. Mental note to self:

“First, NEVER ANSWER THAT DOOR AGAIN! Secondly, finish my ‘knitting project’ with Wisk.” Once that unwieldy job was completed, I then divvied up the boys and girls to find everyone a swimsuit that fit. As I sorted through Joan’s bin, handing the swim apparel out left and right, I tried to coax names out of the kids, but to no avail. I didn’t blame them, they all looked like deer in headlights; they were just as much fish out of water as I was today. Fingers crossed, they would warm up to me—most people usually did—eventually! Anyway, after the suits were chosen and extra sandwiches made for the picnic, I had Bill and Heather help me load up the car. This in itself was no easy task—remember, the aforementioned ’74 Pinto Hatchback was my auto of choice! We stuffed the kids, and then ourselves, into the Pinto like a pack of wild monkeys in the clown car at a circus! NO car seats—NO seat belts. (Of course, there were no seatbelt laws back then!) But looking back on it, we were stuffed in there so tight that nothing short of a head-on collision could have dislodged anyone of us anyway.

I glanced at my watch as we pulled onto the Highway—almost noon. I had planned to get to the lake by 10:00 AM so that the kids could swim and play a couple of hours before the picnic lunch. Best laid plans, right? As I tried to shift the schedule around in my head, one of the little boys started to cry. “Oh please, no!” I thought to myself, “Hadn’t the day been hard enough already?” I put on my “calm” voice and said, “Sweetie, we are going to the lake and we are going to have the bestest time ever! We’re gonna make sand castles and have a picnic, and I even brought some candy for after lunch. SO PLEASE QUIT CRYING!” He stuck his thumb in his mouth, stared out the window and the rest of the ride was uneventful. Another note to self—not only does bribery and manipulation work for mamas with their teenagers...they are also a babysitter’s most effective tool in her quest for PEACE AND QUIET!

Once we got to the lake, Bill and Heather tried their level best to help me pry the kids out of the back seat and hatchback. Holding the smaller ones in my arms, having the older ones hold onto the hem of my cover up, and carrying our beach accessories to the water took more skill and precision than the “Flying Wallendas” ever dreamed of! I laid out our blanket and started pulling things out of my magic bag of goodies. I handed out pails,



shovels, bubble-blowers and sippy cups. For about an hour, we played in the sand at the water’s edge. Joan’s daycare kids and my kids had melded into one big happy group of kids at the beach! The sounds of excited voices and high-pitched laughter became pretty intoxicating. I started patting myself on the back for how well I had taken charge of a rather difficult situation. Wait, I started congratulating myself a bit prematurely. The little boy who had started crying in the car came up to me and said his first words of the day. “Wanna go home.”

“Me too,” I thought. Feeling rather defeated, I knelt down and gave him a hug. “It will be okay. We are going home really soon. How ‘bout we open this picnic basket and start our lunch. After our sandwiches, there might be candy!” He wiped a lone tear off his cheek and helped me pull out lunch and set it onto the blanket. Whew—crisis averted!

After lunch, the kids wanted to head back into the water, but I thought

we should head home. The sun was scorching and the one thing I forgot to bring in my magic bag of goodies was sunscreen. We were all getting a bit pink, so I made the executive decision that it was time to go. In my defense, if we had gotten to the lake when I originally planned, we would have been home before the noonday sun attacked us! Again, we all trudged back to the car and stuffed the kids and then ourselves back into our assigned places—the only difference this time is that

we were covered in sand, were hot and sweaty AND feeling the beginnings of a nasty sunburn! It seemed to take twice as long to get back to Deb’s as it seemed to get to the lake. As I pulled onto our street, I noticed a lady going from house to house; it looked like she had just left Deb’s. I could see a pamphlet she had left tucked into the screen door. Sorry, but I surely didn’t have the time or the inclination to deal with an Avon lady that day.

After I got all ten of the kids inside, I asked Heather to grab the Avon lady’s brochure off of the front door. I then bumped up the air conditioning a notch, and got the shriveled children out of the still-wet swimsuits. Oh my! Some of the little ones were really pink...I mean, lobster pink. I rummaged thru Deb’s medicine cabinet and came up with some Aloe Vera lotion to rub on their arms, legs and noses. Heather came in the bathroom and told me she put the paper from the door on the coffee table; she said it was about a missing dog. “Well, we can always give them Wisk,” I sighed to myself.

Heather overheard me and started crying, begging me not to give away their dog. “Her won’t eat no more carpet. We promise her won’t!”

How do you explain sarcasm to a 5-year-old? “I’m just joking Sweetie,” I told her.

Then my perpetual cry-boy had tears streaming down his face as he said to me, “Wanna go home.” I tried to reassure him by saying that Miss Joan would be back really soon, and

that I knew his sunburn must hurt something awful.

“Let’s rub this on the burn, and then maybe we can all go have some cookies, okay?” I pleaded, once again resorting to bribery. Alarmingly, some of the other kids were starting to whimper too. Help me Lord. At this point, all the voices in my head were screaming simultaneously, “JOAN, WHERE ARE YOU?”

By 2:00, the meltdowns were in full swing. I handed out cups of juice and some cookies—after all, I had promised Cry-boy a treat. Then I announced, “NAP TIME!” Putting the boys in one room and the girls in another, I pulled the shades and tried to slip out of the rooms. “When y’all wake up, I just know Miss Joan will be here!” From my lips to God’s ears, I pitifully thought to myself!

However, that didn’t satisfy Cry-boy. He started wailing. “Wanna go home!” he screamed. He jumped out of the bed and made a run for the front door. I grabbed onto his shirt from behind and scooped him up before he could make his getaway. I was pretty sure I would never hear the end of it if I lost one of the kids. Escape, indeed—not on my watch!!! I carried him back to the bedroom as he kicked and screamed, “Wanna go home, Wanna go home!!!” I laid him back down by the other boys, covered him with a sheet and tried to soothe him. “You’ll be going home soon, I promise, little one.”

The other kids drifted off, one by one...but not my precious Cry-boy. He was now whimpering softly. He looked up at me with the saddest eyes on earth and begged me, “Wanna go home!” That was it. I started crying right along with him. “I wanna go home too,” I whispered. I sat on the edge of the bed and confided to him, “I’m not even supposed to be here. I’m just trying to help my sister out. This is my summer vacation. For that matter, you’re not even supposed to be here either! This is all Miss Joan’s fault.” I looked down into Cry-boy’s face and saw that he had

finally drifted off for his nap. Drying my eyes, I quietly stepped out of the room and pulled the door almost shut.

I sat down in the living room trying to mentally assess the damage of the day. Exactly when was it that the wheels had come off this train? Was it when Wisk had eaten enough green indoor/outdoor carpet to weave an indoor arena football field? In my own defense, I had handled that crisis the best I could...(I even saved the thread in a Ziploc bag, because Bill asked if he could take it to Vacation Bible School for Show and Tell...was I a rocking aunt or what?). Or, was it when Joan had descended upon me with a hoard of children that I certainly had not planned on entertaining that day? MY plan had been to take the nieces and

this age!” She then laughed and told me not to worry about a thing; she would explain her role in the day’s craziness to all of the parents. After we woke the girls, she walked them one by one into the living room. Joan went back for the boys while I went to retrieve the mesh bag I had put the wet swimsuits in. Joan marched the boys down the hallway as I stuck my head into each bedroom for a quick check. Uh oh, she forgot Cry-boy; no way is she leaving him with me, I thought to myself. I rushed back into the boys’ bedroom and woke him. “Miss Joan’s here for you.”

I called out to Joan in the living room, “Hey, you forgot one.”

She turned around and looked back at me in confusion and said, “He’s not with me.”

“What do you mean he’s not with you?” I said, incredulous. “YOU brought him here this morning!”

She adamantly shook her head and said, “No, I only have the six kids here. Remember

when I walked in, I told you that you sure had a houseful, didn’t I?”

“I had a houseful AFTER you got here. Before you came, it was just me and Deb’s kids,” I shrieked back at her!

I remember thinking I was going to pass out. My brain was going a mile a minute. I tried to replay that morning in my mind. Who was this kid? Think, Think! Wait a minute—the police cars, the Avon lady walking the streets, the notice that Heather got off of the front door. Heather had said that it was for a missing dog.

I ran to the coffee table and picked up the flyer. Sure enough, on it was a picture of a dog...and a little boy. MY CRY-BOY! (Although to be fair to Heather there was no way she could have recognized him since in this picture he was smiling, and WE certainly had NOT seen that expression ALL DAY!) Above his picture was one word: “MISSING.”

OH LORD! Had I been holding this little boy hostage all day? AGAINST HIS CRYING LITTLE WILL? Lord!

I sat down in the living room trying to mentally assess the damage of the day. Exactly when was it that the wheels had come off this train?

nephew to the lake so our first day together would be fun and memorable. Hmmn, memorable—check.

As I continued my self-flagellation, I noticed two police cars outside with that Avon Lady; did a customer refuse to pay for their makeup, or had someone stolen her samples? I wondered if I should go out and see what was going on, but decided against leaving the kids in the house alone. Then—Thank the Lord—I saw Joan driving up. I promise you, I actually heard angels singing the “Hallelujah Chorus” as her car hit the driveway! She burst into the house, apologizing for taking so long. “But you know doctors,” she said.

Since she didn’t ask how the kids were, I thought I would volunteer the news of the day as I walked her back to the bedrooms to collect the kids. “We went to the lake, had a picnic, made sand castles, and oh yeah, we all got a little sunburned. One little boy seemed really homesick. He cried...a lot.”

Joan nodded and smiled, “Sorry ’bout that, but that’s how kids are at

Help! Me! Please!

I took Cry-boy by his hand and ran out to the street where the police cars were, yelling at the top of my lungs, "Here is your little boy!!! I have your little boy!!!" His Mom saw us and ran to him, gathering him in her arms. They held each other tightly as they both continued crying; I wondered to myself if prison jumpsuits came in vertical stripes, as they would be more slimming. Maybe with time off for good behavior, I would be out in time for next year's pilgrimage to St. Pete.

Seeing the Mother and son embrace, I was in turn frightened, relieved, and confused. How in the world was this ever going to make sense to her and the county's finest without the aid of graphs or flow charts? I was there and I didn't even have a firm grip on how this happened. Just then, Joan, her daycare kids and my kids spilled out onto the driveway. I was vaguely aware of questions being asked and questions being answered.

As chaotic and discombobulated as

Joan could be most of the time, she seemed to be doing a good job relaying to the police officers the innocence of what had occurred. They all theorized that Cry-boy (excuse me, Max...by then, he had a name) had wandered off from his yard, joined Joan's daycare kids as she unloaded them from her car and he then just walked into the house with them. Joan had thought he was with me; I thought he was one of hers. My stomach started to unclench a bit.

"She promised!" he screamed,
"She promised if I just quit
crying and did what she said,
she would give me candy!"

Then I vaguely recall seeing Heather show the Ziploc bag with the green thread in it to a female officer as she proudly announced, "Aunt Wisi pulled this out of my dog's butt today. Her says we can take it to Show and Tell at church!" Stomach re-clenching! Then I saw Joan and the officers laughing and hugging their sides. Well...that had to be a good sign, didn't it? Maybe they all saw this as the screwball comedy

that it was!

The more they talked and smiled, the more confident I became that everything was going to be all right. I breathed a sigh of relief and started to gather my nieces and nephew by their hands, ushering them into the house. Then, I heard the one line that no one would EVER WANT TO HEAR. The little boy, who at best had only uttered three words at a time up to this point, now lifted his tear-stained face to his Mom and wailed at the top of his lungs as he pointed his tiny finger at me, "She promised!" he screamed, "She promised if I just quit crying and did what she said, she would give me candy!"

It was at that exact moment with all eyes on me and the police officers no longer laughing, that I realized this particular beach of a day was still not quite over, and I sighed to myself, "Yeah, vertical stripes would be nice."

Lisa Love, a talented and insightful writer with a skewed sense of humor, looks for, and often finds the absurd masquerading as the mundane.

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Dale

by Bettye H. Galloway

Julie sat down in the grass and watched her friend Nell finish her chores. She was concerned because Nell had told her that Dale was no longer doing the weekly wash for her mother, that Nell couldn't go to Dale's any more, and that Dale's coming to the New house was no longer "proper."

This was a term that was unfamiliar to Julie. I wonder what's wrong with Dale, she pondered. Dale was her favorite person, outside of Nell. Dale always welcomed her into her tiny cabin on the other side of the hill. Sometimes Julie's ramblings took her in the direction of the cabin, and she would stop and eat the bowl of bread and milk that Dale always had

on hand. At other times, she would go directly to Dale's house just to talk, knowing that she would be given something to eat. Dale's house was best in winter—then she would usually have something cooking on the stove sending the smell of food steaming through the two rooms. Whatever she had, she shared with Julie. Dale loved the child, this child who had ignorant

and uncaring parents—nobody to care for her—and it broke her heart to see Julie wandering in the wintertime without enough clothes to keep her warm and without enough solid food to put flesh on her frail body. So at every chance she shared what she had. And sometimes the food that Julie ate was the only food in the house. But Julie never knew that.

Nell finished what she was doing. "I've got to go back to the house now," she said, "before Mama gets mad at me. You want to play with me now?"

"Naw," said Julie. "I think I'll go down and see about Dale. Can you play this evenin'?"

"If I don't have to help Mama," said Nell.

Julie carefully skirted Nell's house and made her way down the other side of the hill leading to Dale's.

The black woman had seen her coming and was waiting on the porch to greet her as she came up the path. "How's Julie this mornin'?" she asked as Julie carefully placed her feet on the sawed portion of a tree trunk that served as the step to the porch.

"Fine," said Julie. "Are you sick?"

"No, Honey, I'm not sick, why you ask that?"

"Well," said Julie, as she entered the tiny cabin through the door held open by the woman. "Nell says you ain't washin' for them no more, and that she can't come down to see you 'cause it ain't proper.

"Oh, Honey," laughed Dale, "don't you worry your little head about that. Miss Ella New is just on her high-horse again! If everything in this old world was made to fit Miss Ella, it sure would be some world!"

"But she said yesterday that Nell couldn't come to see you!"

"Course she can!"

"But Miss Ella said she couldn't!"

"Oh, Miss Ella'll come off that. She's just puttin' on one of her shows. She just ain't got 'nough money to pay me right now, so she's just sayin' that she don't like me so's she'll have an excuse for havin' to do her own work for a while."

"Why would she do that?"

"Cause she thinks she is some high-born lady, and she ain't supposed to get her hands dirty doin' no work...."

"But my mama does her own work...."

"Honey, there's mamas and there's mamas. Ain't nothin' alike in your mama and Miss Ella."

"But Miss Ella is real smart..."

"What you mean, smart? There's worlds of difference in smart and smart. Now you take Miss Ella—she may be smart in that she can read books and talk good and things like that, and you think she's smart because your mama

can't. But you listen to me, your mama may not be smart in things like Miss Ella, and your mama may not do a lot of things you would like for her to do, but where it really matters, your mama is real smart. She don't stop you from doin' a lot of things that lets you learn. She may not help you—she may not can help you—but she lets you learn by yourself. And that's learnin' the hard way, but it's good learning 'cause you won't forget what you learn when you get it like that. No, don't you ever wish your mama was like Miss Ella. You the lucky one, girl, to have the mama you got. It's Nell you ought to be feeling sorry for, 'cause she ain't gonna have the chances you'll get...."

"But, Dale, Nell's got ever'thing!"

"Cept a chance to learn by herself! Now, here, sit by the table and I'll

"Ain't no woman gonna plan a world where ever' day starts with cookin' a meal and ever' day ends with cookin' a meal! No, sir, God sure ain't no woman!"

find us somethin' t'eat." Dale pattered around the stove and came back to the table with two bowls filled with steaming broth.

At the sight of them, Julie's mouth watered. "What is it?" she asked.

"Oh, just a little old fox squirrel that's been runnin' around that scaley-bark tree down in the pasture. He makes a fine stew, don't he?"

"Sure does!" said Julie as she ladled a spoonful of broth from the bowl to her mouth.

"Whoa, there," said Dale. "Didn't you forget something?"

"Yeah," said Julie. "I'm sorry...I forgot."

"Okay, now bow your head and let's give the good Lord His due. Remember, if He can take care of us, we surely can remember Him a little bit."

Julie bowed her head and listened attentively as Dale reverently mumbled the message that had been taught to her in childhood. She finished and picked up her spoon. "Dale, why do you always say Him?"

"What you mean?"

"Well, ever' time you pray, you always call God a 'Him'. Is God a Him?"

"Sure is."

"Couldn't God be a woman, Dale?"

"Ain't no way!"

"Why not....if you can't see Him like you say, how do you know?"

"I know."

"But how do you know?" the child insisted.

"Well, I'll tell you," said the woman. "Did you ever notice how hard I work and how hard your mama works? Well, sir, a man goes to work, sure, but a man comes home and rests. Now, a woman gets up in the morning and cooks breakfast, then she works all morning, and then she cooks dinner, and then she works all evenin' and then she's gotta cook supper. And even

then her work ain't done, 'cause she's still got to wash the dirty dishes before she gets through. And that's not even countin' the other things she has to do before bedtime. But whatever else she's

gotta do, she's gotta stop and cook."

"But what's that go to do with whether God's a man or a woman?"

"Well, Honey, just think—it's as plain as the nose on your face. Ain't no woman gonna plan a world where ever' day starts with cookin' a meal and ever' day ends with cookin' a meal! No, sir, God sure ain't no woman!"

"Well, I guess not, Dale, but whatever He is, He made good squirrel!" responded the child as she emptied the spoon into her mouth.

"Yessiree," said Dale, "Squirrel is the one thing I miss most since Tom passed. He used to keep us pretty well in squirrels—and rabbits, too—but since he died they're gettin' kinda scarce around here. I can take his old rifle and hunt as much as he did, but I just don't have the eyes he had, and it's hard for me to see a squirrel until the leaves have fell off, and by that time they've mostly gone into their nests for the winter.

"Couldn't you just shoot into the nests?" asked Julie. "Looks like you'd hit one for sure if you shot into the

nest.”

“Now, Julie Mathis, I’m plumb surprised at you. All of God’s little ole creatures has got to have a fightin’ chance at livin’. And what chance would this ole fox squirrel had had if I was just to shoot into his nest? As much as I wanted to cook him, he had to have a chance, too. Uh, uh, I couldn’t have eaten him if I had killed him in his sleep. But I knew if I waited long enough under that tree, he’d come out sooner or later and I would have my chance at him. I got’m, too!”

“He sure is good,” said Julie, as she pondered the wisdom of her friend.

“Finish eatin’ your stew, and we’ll go out and gather up some of the limbs that fell off the pine trees and make us a fire,” said Dale. “It’s getting’ a little chilly today.”

“Sure is,” said Julie. “I got cold comin’ over here.”

The two sat quietly, eating the nourishing broth. Dale finished first and took her bowl and spoon to the dishpan to wash them while Julie gleaned the last morsel from her bowl.

“Come on,” said Dale as she finished putting away the dishes. “Let’s go get that wood.” They crossed the yard to the edge of the clearing and began picking up the small twigs and branches in their arms. “Grab a handful of

them dry pine needles, too,” said Dale. “We’ll need them to get it started since I ain’t got no coal oil.” Arms loaded, they retraced their steps toward the house.

“Dale, why we gatherin’ up these limbs when you got wood cut in the rack by the chim’ley?”

“Them’s big logs to go on after the fire is started. Ain’t no way to get a big log goin’ ‘less you start a little fire first. I’ll put one of them on in a bit.”

They entered the cabin and emptied

a while,” she said, patting the space at her side.

Julie stretched out beside her and lay watching the flames. The warmth from the burning logs and the fullness of her stomach made her drowsy, and she soon fell asleep, snuggled in the softness of the quilt.

Dale saw that Julie was sound asleep and rose to resume her housework. Several times she quietly added fuel to the fire without disturbing the child. The afternoon passed.

“Julie.”

“Hmmm?”

“Julie, Honey, you oughta be wakin’ up now.” Julie rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “It’s the middle of the afternoon; you best be getting’ home now.”

“Oh, Dale, I was

sound asleep!”

“You been sleepin’ a long time...you gotta be runnin’ along.”

“Okay,” said Julie, “but I sure do like to come down here to see you. Can Nell come with me next time?”

“Sure can,” said Dale, “Anytime she wants.”

Bettye Galloway was born, reared, and educated in Oxford, Lafayette County, Mississippi. She has now retired from Mississippi state service (primarily the University of Mississippi) and as executive vice president of a drug testing laboratory.

“And what chance would this ole fox squirrel had had if I swas just to shoot into his nest?”

their arms on the hearth. Dale carefully piled the needles in the center of the firebox, added the small twigs and branches, and, reaching to the mantel above her, selected a wooden match. She scratched it on the sandstone side of the fireplace and touched it to the needles. A small blue flame rose and gently lapped the twigs until they, too, caught and began burning. Dale watched it for a moment, decided it was going to burn, and went outside for a larger piece of wood from the rack. She added the log to the fire. She took a patchwork quilt from the foot of the bed and placed on the floor in front of the fire. “Let’s rest here for



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T - S H I R T S A N D M O R E

Guest Speaker

a poem by Marsha Mathews



Marsha Mathews teaches writing at Dalton State College in Georgia. She has published poetry in numerous literary magazines, including *Appalachian Heritage*, *Apalachee Quarterly*, *Greensboro Review*, *Hampden-Sydney*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Oyez Review*, and *Pembroke*. She advises the campus literary magazine, *Tributaries*, c/o Patrick Tisdell, Editor, 650 College Drive, Dalton, GA 30720.

Biggest hullabaloo I ever seen here
at the Methodist Church,
day Preacher's dog, Majesty, dern fool dog,
trotted right on in alongside everyone else,

shaking dry. She the derndest flop-eared rascal
this side of Clicketty-clack circle (that's where
the coal trains bring town traffic to a screeching
halt). Church-busting dog.
More meanness than you can shake a stick at.

Law. Strutting down the aisle,
stub of a tail pointing straight up
like she something right special,
she moved in and out between the pews—
down one side, under and out the other,
sniffing the old singing books like she greeting
anyone who ever sing all six verses
"Amazen Grace." Sniffing for folk long gone
(and I ain't talking about leaving town,
if you know what I mean).

Course, in all of three minutes,
the church split on what to be done about her.
Dog lovers on the left. Dog despisers on the right.
None says a word.
All's quiet. Preacher's footsteps
clack like dices up the walk.
Among us, such stares and glares
as would curdle buttermilk.

I heard tell years later,
"Majesty come in 'cause it spitting snow, is all,"
but I ain't one to speculate.
Way that critter done pulled herself up
onto the pew like she owned it?
She pressed her snout into purple cushion,
snorted and snuggled and stretched
rolled on her back
loll'd out her tongue
from her black smacking smile,
lay there still as held breath,
waiting for someone
to give her belly a good rub.
None had heart to grab her collar
and shuck her out the door.

That day, sermon bumpety bumped along
all over I'll get out, hopped here to there
like a cricket in a jar. We couldn't figger
if Elijah coming or going. Worse —
Preacher forgot to take up tithes.
Mz. Laidlow she jumped
straight over the altar rail,
smoothing her skirt with one hand,
grabbing the plate with the other,
then passed it around right quick.
Folks scurried into pockets.
Change jangled, checks ripped.

Majesty, she plum sat up and howled.
No ordinary howl neither.
But a howl the likes of which
you could feel in the belly, shuddering in circles
like a tadpole looking for legs.
Piana started playing: "I'll Fly Away,"
while everyone stared at the fool dog,
especially poor Preacher.



The Lesson

a childhood memoir by Randy Dobbs

Mary Lee Armstrong was my 7th grade teacher and I adored her. She was short, but she moved like she had legs nine feet long. She was a ball of fire and seemed to have energy that never ran low. I think she knew that I was fond of her and frankly, I think she was fond of me.

Actually, I've often wondered if she was fond of me or felt sorry for me and started watching out for me. Sometimes I think she even worried about me. She talked to me a lot—at interesting times: at the end of the lunch line while we were waiting on everyone to go through the line; in the line while we waited to get water after P.E.; and in line at the end of the day for dismissal.

I worried that others were aware

of how much she liked me, so often I pretended to ignore her—it didn't work—she would ask me if something was wrong.

I worried a lot about my mother while I was at school. I wondered if she was getting along OK—worried that she was able to do the chores at home—worried that she would fall while getting in or out of the car at the bank—worried that a robber would break into the house during the day

and she would not be able to get away.

My mother was handicapped. I use that word because she was handicapped long before the politically correct word of *disabled* was used. Having now worked in the field of children with disabilities and understanding the subtle difference that people with disabilities want you to know and understand about those two words, I've decided that my mother was handicapped—certainly disabled as well, but really just handicapped.

In fact, our whole family was handicapped. When they took my mother's leg off, her life, my father's life, and my life were all changed forever. In fact,

Childhood Reflections

my sister—who was not yet born—was changed as well. Can someone be changed even before they are not conceived and born? I now know they can.

My 7th grade year was a particularly difficult one for me. Mrs. Armstrong knew that, and she provided support day in and day out. What she did *most* was to talk to me—and help me talk about what was going on with my family. During one particularly difficult time in the spring, Mrs. Armstrong decided that if perhaps I talked to some of the students about my mother and her handicap it might help me. You see, the kids at school never knew *why* I was always worried, upset, confused or just plain *out-of-it*. Mrs. Armstrong talked to me about what I might say and how students might respond. I told her I wasn't sure if I could do it.

Days dragged on, and she continued to talk and encourage me.

We had never had a maid at home. I guess that was because we really couldn't afford it, and also because my mother never trusted anyone in the house. She was afraid of almost everything. However, finally, my father talked her into it.

My father had hired a day-laborer—a man named Ronald—for his construction work and the man had worked for him for several weeks. In fact, the guy was so good that my father kept him busy by bringing him to our house for odd jobs. This was to keep him busy and keep him paid so he wouldn't go to work for someone else. Ronald told my father that his wife needed to work and that she did domestic work. They had kids and really needed the money. My parents argued over it—mother proclaiming that we needed the money also and why would we keep paying these people we didn't even know when it might be us who was desperate in the near future.

I hated it when they fought—I always wanted to do something to stop them. I found that the most effective way was to scream and holler at them

or sometimes just throw up. My father always said nothing, and my mother would tell me to go to bed, explaining that everything was okay. “However,” I remember thinking, “If everything was okay, why did they fight all the time?”

My father won out—which he did often—by simply not giving up. It may have taken days of arguing and fussing, but he was good at staying the course.

Ronald's wife showed up at 7:30 AM sharp on a Saturday morning, dressed in a white maid's uniform that had more starch in it than any shirt my dad or me had ever worn. Mother made her come on Saturday, so I would be there with her, because she was uncomfortable having someone in the house with her when she was there alone.

The woman's name was Joyce, and

Without any warning, we suddenly heard Joyce screaming. Screaming really, really loudly! My mother and I froze.

she was polite and very business-like. She acted insulted when my mother would tell her how to do things. My mother finally quit telling her how to do things and just sat down. My mother seemed sad. It made no sense to her; here was this professional cleaning lady doing all the chores, leaving her to sit at the kitchen table and drink coffee.

On the other hand, I was thrilled—it meant I wouldn't have to vacuum for at least a couple of days. Our floors were vacuumed more than any carpet in Decatur, Georgia, and I was the master of vacuuming! “Now,” I silently hoped, “I would be free from it until at least Monday!”

Lunch was served at promptly 12:00 noon—our maid fixed lunch! Wow! She not only knew how to clean really well, she fixed us lunch as well! She also told me to quit playing with my food, to sit up straight and to finish eating the soup without picking up the bowl. Soup and a peanut butter sandwich—it was just like a scene out of

“Leave it to Beaver.”

While we were eating, Joyce went back to work in the back of the house—in my parents' bedroom. We heard the vacuum cleaner going—yes, I would not have to vacuum until Monday!

Without any warning, we suddenly heard Joyce screaming. Screaming really, really loudly! My mother and I froze. The screaming was getting louder—she was coming toward us. Still screaming—she ran into the den, grabbed her purse and shopping bag and ran out the door.

My mother and I just sat looking at each other—perplexed—we could still hear the vacuum cleaner. My mother got up and went to the door where Joyce had left leaving the door open. Joyce was running up the street toward the bus stop. My mother stepped out-

side and tried to call her, but she was gone and not to be slowed in her rapid exit.

My mother told me to go into the bedroom and see what was in there. I said no—I was afraid to go into the room with the

vacuum cleaner still running.

Mother insisted, giving me no choice but to go into the back of the house by myself. The vacuum cleaner was still running where Joyce had left it as she departed, screaming at the top of her lungs.

I slowly walked down the long hallway toward their bedroom. The vacuum cleaner was getting louder—my heart was pounding and I felt like it would soon jump out of my throat. I slowly peeked into their bedroom. Nothing. The vacuum cleaner was lying on the floor on the other side of the bed, out of sight. Nothing looked unusual. However, the door to the closet was open.

As I got closer, I could tell that the vacuum cleaner was on the floor half in the closet and half out, but still running. I slowly walked around the bed. When I got to the end of the bed and had an unobstructed view into the closet, I saw it. There it lay on the floor—the vacuum cleaner pushed up against it. It was the shin of a leg; the

leg was on the floor, foot out toward the door of the closet and the knee and thigh slanted back toward the back of the closet. The upper part of the leg was covered in fallen clothes.

Joyce had found my mother's old artificial leg—stored neatly in the closet. My mother had been going through the fitting for a new leg. When cleaning the floor of the closet, Joyce pushed the vacuum up against the foot of the prosthesis, causing it to fall. It was obviously more than she could handle.

I turned the vacuum cleaner off, picked up the leg and walked toward the den. By the time I got to the den, I was laughing hysterically. When my mother saw me, she knew immediately what had happened. I could say nothing—I was about to wet my pants in hysteria! I just stood in front of my mother holding her artificial leg.

But she didn't laugh...in fact, she didn't even smile. To her it was *not* funny. In fact, she told me it was not funny. She told me I should be ashamed of myself and to go put the leg up immediately.

When I returned to the den, having put the leg up and stopping by the bathroom for relief, mother told me not to mention this to my father. To make matters, worse, she then told me to go finish the chore. So much for my break from vacuuming.

That night I heard my mother telling my father about the incident after they had gone to bed. I eased into the hall to listen, as I did so often. She was fussing at him for having suggested that we have a maid in the first place. It was horrible, she told him, and she was so embarrassed.

On Monday, Mother picked me up from school and didn't drive straight home. In fact, we were going toward downtown Decatur. I asked where we were going, but she offered no explanation. Soon we were driving into a downtown housing project. I was uneasy—I had been told many times NEVER to ride my bike into projects as

it was not safe. I had only been in the projects one other time, and that was when I had ridden with my father to pick up a day-laborer who lived there.

I was somewhat surprised by what I saw. Most of the houses were nice—small, but nice. They seemed to be well kept, and the yards were well groomed. I watched small children playing on the sidewalks—riding bikes, playing baseball and chasing each other. Hm-m-m...just the same games we played after school. But we might as well have been thousands of miles away instead of the two miles that separated our house from the projects.

We soon stopped in front of a duplex. Mother did not pull into the driveway—she seemed very nervous. The yard was incredible. It had rows of flowers along the walkway that made it look like something out of a magazine, especially if you didn't look too far up the sidewalk to realize that it

The leg incident was not lost on me. I had developed my plan. I would take Mrs. Armstrong up on her offer.

was a duplex in a housing project. The house was freshly painted with neat trim around the windows and doors.

My mother gave me an envelope with cash in it. She told me to go to the door and give the money to Joyce. I simply stared at my mother in disbelief. We were sitting in front of Joyce's house. How did she know where Joyce lived? I had heard my father argue that they needed the money—*this place looked better than ours*.

Again, I did not want to go, but she gave me no choice. I don't know why I was nervous, but again, my heart was in my throat. There was no doorbell, but instead a nice, new brass knocker on the door with *The Porters* etched in it.

I slowly raised the knocker and let it fall. It was sooooo loud. I thought I had broken it. No answer—good, I could leave. I looked back out toward the car. My mother motioned for me

to knock again. I reluctantly complied. This time I heard footsteps coming toward the door.

I saw the curtain beside the door move, but I was still not able to see anyone. Then, I heard a voice—it was Joyce. Without opening the door, she asked what I wanted. I spoke loudly into the door that my mother wanted to pay her for her work. To my surprise, she shouted back to go away. She did not want our money. I quickly ran to the car and jumped in.

Mother seemed puzzled and sad. The envelope of money lay on the seat between us as she slowly drove back toward our house. We said nothing.

The leg incident was not lost on me. I had developed my plan. I would take Mrs. Armstrong up on her offer to talk to kids about my mother's leg. The leg falling out of the closet and scaring Joyce had strangely inspired me to want to talk. I wasn't sure what

I would talk about. I wasn't sure I was prepared to tell them about Joyce; about my mother's leg and how she lost it; about how I had had to learn how to give her physical therapy; about how I had

learned to rub my mother's stump with lotion to help increase blood circulation; about how I had to put my mother's leg on every morning before I left for school; about how I couldn't go on scout camping trips on Friday nights because my father went fishing on Saturdays and I had to put my mother's leg on; or about how I had to vacuum the house every other day because my mother couldn't.

I wasn't sure what I would tell them but it didn't seem to matter as I sneaked the leg out of the house and headed toward the bus stop. I was taking my mother's old leg to school to show, and I didn't have a clue what I would tell them.

I had not completely thought through the process of getting the leg to school. I had taken a black plastic garbage bag from the kitchen to put the leg in. No surprise...it didn't completely fit. Which end should be in the bag and

which end should hang out? Walking to the bus stop I decided to put the heavier thigh part of the leg in the bag leaving the foot out in full view.

The kids at the bus stop stood in disbelief. I had a really hard time explaining it to them. I was surprised that most did not know that my mother wore an artificial leg. Had they not been paying attention? Had they not seen her limp? *Had they not seen all the things I had to do for her?*

I had about decided to abandon the whole idea of my presentation when the bus pulled up. I waited to board last. Juggling my book bag, the garbage bag and the leg, I climbed the steep steps of the bus. The bus driver ignored me as I walked by. He quickly jolted forward before I had a chance to sit down. We were the next to the last stop, so the bus was almost full. I fell forward as the bus jerked away quickly. I managed to keep my balance almost to the back of the bus when everything I had been carrying became too heavy and too off-balance, and it all tumbled to the floor of the bus. Silence filled the bus as my mother's leg went sliding under seat after seat.

It came to rest at the seat of Wilson Ridley—our class bully. He screeched in disbelief and picked the leg up. I tried to wrestle it from him, but I was no match. He pulled it from my hands and placed it high above his head shouting and announcing to the bus that he had found a leg on the floor.

Before we could get to the next stop, he had the foot part of the leg hanging out of the window. Just as we approached the last stop, we greeted the waiting students with half a leg—out the window.

General chaos filled the bus as we rode the remaining short distance to the school. We arrived at school with the bus rocking and rolling as Wilson led the crowd with my mother's leg!

We entered the school en masse with loud shouts and screams. The teacher on bus duty at the front hallway, Mrs. Smith, snapped into action. She halted

the mob by raising her arms in the air as if she was calling on strength from heaven. Everyone fell silent, even Wilson who was leading the crowd with my mother's leg.

She walked slowly toward Wilson and the leg with great authority. She looked over her glasses—first at the leg, now totally out of the bag—and then at Wilson. She asked him where he got it. He nonchalantly explained that it had come sliding under the seats and stopped in front of him. He had merely picked it up to keep it from becoming a problem on the bus. He explained that he tried to keep everyone calm on the bus, but they would not stop screaming. As if she had handled legs every day, Mrs. Smith reached out and took the leg from Wilson. Reluctantly, he volunteered his find. She then looked up at the crowd, still silent, and asked to whom the leg belonged. I froze.

As if moving away from a terrible

As if moving away from a terrible smell, the students slowly but deliberately moved away from me.

smell, the students slowly but deliberately moved away from me. The parting mass left me standing directly in front of Mrs. Smith—all alone. Again looking over her glasses, she asked if the leg belonged to me. The best I could muster was—*sort of!* Without saying anything, her face demanded additional information. I told her it was my mother's and that Mrs. Armstrong had told me it would be good if I could explain my mother's handicap to the other students.

Still holding the leg, she stood upright and seemed 8 feet tall. She instructed everyone to walk quietly to their classrooms to begin their day of learning. In what seemed like hours, everyone slowly departed down either the upper grade hall or the lower grade hall leaving Mrs. Smith, the leg, and me standing there alone.

Without saying anything, she marched toward the school office with

me in tow. She stood at the entrance to the office and told the secretary that she would return shortly. Without turning toward me, she told me we were going to Mrs. Armstrong's room. As we walked down the long, upper-grade hallway, we passed the library, the music room, the 4th grade classrooms, then the 5th and 6th grade classrooms, the exit to the playground, and finally, the 7th grade rooms. As we passed the exit, I thought of bolting—running until I could run no more. However, I didn't, if for no other reason than because I couldn't leave my mother's leg.

The halls were almost empty as school was about to begin. Mrs. Smith opened the door of Mrs. Armstrong's room and out stepped Mrs. Armstrong; her usual smile greeting all three of us. She smiled at Mrs. Smith and said "*Good morning*" as she took the leg from Mrs. Smith. She told me to go on inside and have a seat. I walked into a room that was all silence and eyes.

I found my seat, put my books away and started immediately on the morning assignment from the board.

Shortly, Mrs. Armstrong came into the room carrying my mother's

leg. She placed it on the table in front of the classroom as everyone watched in disbelief. In her usual upbeat voice, she told the class that we would have a special treat at the end of the day. She proceeded to her desk at the back of the room. As she walked by my desk, she smiled, winked, and started calling the attendance roll from memory. Even though I didn't know what would happen that day, I took a deep breath and knew that everything would be okay.

The last 20 minutes of every afternoon in 7th grade was reserved for homeroom. We did all kinds of things—usually catching up on anything that had been left undone during the day. Looking back now, I know what that last 20 minutes was really for. It was a kind of family time when Mrs. Armstrong taught us lessons that were not in textbooks. She gave us insights into life that were always related to

Childhood Reflections

something going on with students. The lesson taught that day in less than 20 minutes was designed entirely for me. Through her kind questioning of me as I stood beside my mother's leg, I became an expert on prosthetic devices explaining how a "suction" leg worked, how the knee joint was balanced to bend just right as the user walked, how to climb stairs always leading with the "good" leg, how maintaining a healthy stump was very important and most of all just how normal it was to have an artificial leg.

I've often thought back to that period of time in my life, and I now

understand how pivotal that particular moment was in defining the person I would become. I also realize how symbolic and quintessential all of the characters were that were cast in my own little dramedy...the fearful, the bully, the status quo, and the lead-

Throughout my life, I've met the same characters time and time again, all with different faces and different stories.

er who offered encouragement and grace. Throughout my life, I've met the same characters time and time again, all with different faces and different stories. Mrs. Armstrong, however, will always take the lead as the encourager

and tower over all the others in my mind...all five feet of her.

***Randy Dobbs** went on and followed the passion of Mrs. Armstrong and became a 7th grade teacher as well. He used many of those lessons he had learned in his own 7th grade to guide him in working with his adolescents. After serving in both regular and special education, Randy became a principal and found an even broader way to use the lessons he had learned. He currently is a professor at Georgia State University.*



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All You Have to Do Is Dream

by Sylvia A. Nash

Editor's Note: My love for music had its origins in the mid-'50s. I grew up in Nashville, and not only was country music all around, so was the fledgling rock-a-billy. One of my first memories was listening to the 45 RPM records that had been given to me by Lester Sweatt, a family friend and local DJ. One record that stood out was "Wake Up, Little Susie," by the Everly Brothers. I nearly drove my parents crazy playing that record over and over. The song was written by Felice and Boudleaux Bryant. In the late summer of 1995, writer Sylvia A. Nash interviewed Felice Bryant for *Smoky Mountain Memories*. The article was first published as: "Felice Bryant—Was It Destiny or Chance?" and ran in the magazine's September 1995 issue. Boudleaux Bryant died in 1987; Felice died April 22, 2003.

Paths cross. Two people meet. Destiny or chance? The "chance" meeting of Felice and Boudleaux Bryant, co-authors of "Rocky Top," weighs heavily in favor of destiny. At the time the two met, both were working at the Shrader Hotel in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Due to a booking mix-up, Boudleaux's band was working in the cocktail lounge. Nineteen-year-old

Felice was running the elevator, just one of the three jobs she held because, according to her, she "had too much

spare time."

Felice saw Boudleaux head toward a nearby water fountain on a break and ran to it first. She asked Boudleaux "Can I buy you a drink?" In spite of the fact that she drenched him when she turned on the spigot, they were married three days later.

That sounds like a short romance unless you heard Felice's explanation of this "chance" encounter. She was convinced that she would have met Boudleaux sometime somewhere. She had dreamed of him when she was only eight years old and had "looked for him forever." After they started writing songs together, Felice said, the dreams just kept coming true.

Both Felice and Boudleaux began writing songs when they were kids. Felice continued to write during the

long hours Boudleaux was away working dances and radio stations—out of boredom! It was a year, though, before either knew that the other was writing! Soon, they were writing together, working off of each other's energy and inspiration.

What they initially wrote, Felice said, was very eclectic. They wrote pop ballads, country ballads, polka, songs for Broadway musicals, etc. Part of the reason they were able to cover such a range was their musical heritage. According to Felice, "If you know anything about Italian families, [you know] they're like these mountain folk. Everybody sings." In addition, she grew up in a diverse neighborhood and as a result had a culturally rich musical experience.

Though Felice played no musical instruments, she was able to record her melodies. She said God put her on earth at the same time as the tape recorder so she could capture her melodies on tape as she captured her lyrics on paper.

Boudleaux could write the melodies he composed. Felice said he was the technician of the pair as well as an accomplished musician, playing the violin, guitar, bass, and piano. Both were creative and inventive, and together they were a wonderful mix. Initially, they wrote and sang together (as Bud and Betty Bryant) but then settled down to what they did so well—writing the songs heard and loved over nearly half a century.

In addition to being able to write just about anything, Felice and Boudleaux were quite prolific, producing over 4000 songs during their lifetime together. Felice attributed this to something of a snowball effect. "It seemed the more ideas we had and the more we did, the more we could do and the more ideas we got...there's a stream that happens and it just flows into you."

That stream flowed outward, too, contributing to the careers of many singers. Felice and Boudleaux tai-

lored a number of songs (both collectively and individually) for the Everly Brothers, including "All I Have to Do Is Dream," "Wake Up, Little Susie," "Bye Bye Love," and "Bird Dog."

The rest of their music, Felice said,

One of their songs stands out as an East Tennessee favorite. "Rocky Top" is the state song of Tennessee and official fight song of The University of Tennessee.

was such that most anyone could have taken it. And most anyone did; their music has been recorded by artists as diverse as Little Jimmy Dickens, Bobby Moore, Herb Alpert, The Beach Boys, Tony Bennett, Bill Carlisle, Cher, Arthur Fiedler & The Boston Pops, Red Foley, The Grateful Dead, Burl Ives, The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, Elvis Presley, Charlie Pride, Jim Reeves, Ricky Van Shelton, Dinah Shore, and Simon and Garfunkle.

Felice and Boudleaux's songs have received numerous awards over the years. They themselves were inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1986 and into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1991.

But, one of their songs stands out as an East Tennessee favorite. "Rocky Top," state song of Tennessee and official fight song of The University of Tennessee, was first recorded in 1968 by the Osborne Brothers. Ironically, "Rocky Top" was the result of a diversion. Felice and Boudleaux were working on an album for Archie Campbell. The album was to be called "The Golden Years." Felice got worn-out writing about the golden years and needed a break. She wanted to write something upbeat. So, on a break, and in less than 15 minutes, she and Boudleaux wrote "Rocky Top." Then went back to "work." Somehow it seems rather appropriate that they named their Gatlinburg inn the Rocky Top Inn. It was, after all, a place where lots of folks came when they needed a diversion.

It took a while for Felice to begin writing again after Boudleaux died in

1987, but she did. She even spent a couple of days working with another songwriter. But, she said, in two whole days, they wrote only five songs. She and Boudleaux could "knock out" as many as ten good songs a day! "It was fun (writing with Boudleaux)," she reflected, "It stopped being fun."

Still, it is fitting that Felice continued the writing career that she started—in boredom—all those years ago. Perhaps her bore-

dom was no more chance than her meeting Boudleaux.

Sylvia A. Nash is a freelance writer and former English teacher living in West Tennessee. Her work—which includes poetry, short stories, and articles—has appeared in a previous issue of SouthernReader as well as Long Story Short, GeoParent, Smoky Mountain Memories, Blue Ridge Country, Christian Singles, E2K, Living with Teenagers, and Your Peacemaking Heart. She is currently working on her first novel, a cozy mystery, and shopping for an agent.





The Country Chickens

by Marshall Lancaster

Growing up in Halifax County, North Carolina was not exactly like growing up in Charlotte—far from it. I spent most summers at home by the air-conditioning, waiting for school to resume, while local farmers toiled in the fields and drove past our house in trucks weighted down by tobacco, cotton, and peanuts.

One farmer warned me of the likelihood that I would one day find myself priming tobacco in the hot sun, but it never came to pass. Summer Thursdays at least had the potential to be exciting; my mother would always buy groceries at the A & P on this day. I was almost guaranteed lunch out on these days, usually at Anna's Italian

Restaurant, and that was always a treat. We didn't have a summer camp. For us, a glove, a softball, and a wooden bat were all that were required for a good time and friendships that would last forever, or at least until next season. Three practices were enough to inspire friendship, mutual trust, and respect among twelve youngsters who

would otherwise have whiled away the hours on "Happy Days" reruns, "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood," "The Price is Right," or whatever soap-opera their mothers happened to be watching. We were kids bound for some greater mission, some larger purpose in life during the summer. We wore the CC on our jerseys with great pride. To our opponents, we were the *Country Chickens*, but in our minds we were the rural equivalent of the New York Yankees, playing to proud moms and dads driving Plymouth Dusters, Chevy Caprice Classics, and Gremlin Pacers in an asphalt jungle at ninety-five degrees. In actuality, our team was

the *Community Churches* because no single church in our area had enough twelve-year-old boys and girls to field a softball team. Our coach brought together several interested youngsters, and on most days we gelled. A number of girls and boys invested the whole summer in this league before returning to school, and the games were frequently well-attended. Somehow, in the summer of 1979, we were bound to regain lost respect. The *bock! bock! bock!* we overheard in the opponents' dug-outs served only to inspire us.

It all started during one of our practices when Coach put me in left field and called me bushel basket, a term of endearment which all young men worked hard to earn in the sweat and dust of that hot summer. I suppose I was able to catch most of the pop flies hit to left field, but the upcoming tournament would test my abilities like never before. We were playing in the season's last big tournament in Halifax, North Carolina. It had been the standard fare of the weekend tournament—moms and dads selling hot dogs and fountain sodas, teams either preparing for games or on the field hoping to advance to the next bracket, and rowdy fans exhorting

friends and relatives to get that elusive base hit or strike out the batter. Frequently, some unsupervised kids could be found skipping rocks across the parking lot. "Oops, what was that crashing sound!" the coach's son inquired from the stands. Obviously, not everyone's attention was fixed on the game like ours was.

Unfortunately, we started the tournament in the losers' bracket, falling victim to Lakeview Park's batting arsenal in game one. The word on the street was that this team had two thirteen-year-olds and the league was fine with that. We had only one. Each of their players sported new cleats, a fancy green shirt with matching knickers, and a big pack of what I mistakenly took for Red Man chewing tobacco. Apparently, they were legitimate. They looked like

the larger-than-life players one might see in Major League Baseball games. There we were—white sneakers, blue jeans, and a holey red shirt with yellow numbers and the letters CC. Brand new, the shirt smelled like grape blow pops. Misshaped red caps rested backwards on our heads. To Lakeview Park, we were the *Country Chickens*, but we loved the game and they knew it. We put up a competitive effort against Lakeview Park, but they won. The losers' bracket was not where we wanted to be, but we didn't have much choice. It sounded so bad—the *losers' bracket*. Were we branded and scarred for life? Would we make it through puberty? Would we raise families as our parents had? What right had the tournament sponsors to typecast us after only one outing?

How was I to know that my whole life would change in an instant? I went up to the plate against the hapless Halifax Hustlers. I swung at the second pitch—barely hitting the ball—but it gained momentum and

"You have beautiful eyes," she observed, as I struggled for something to say.

rolled quickly past the pitcher and the shortstop, finally scooting between the legs of the left center fielder and rolling ever so slowly deep into the outfield somehow. Could homeruns really start out as wimpy grounders barely making it past the pitcher? Left center fielder Sally Lou—or whatever her name was—failed to put her glove far enough down to halt my gutless grounder, and it was too late. I had officially hit my first homer. How did she miss that pathetic grounder? I remember the low fives—then the trend—as I approached home plate. She was more than willing to discuss her blunder after the game—which of course we won by landslide. I remember Sally Lou's words as we dusted off our gloves and bought Cokes. "You have beautiful eyes," she observed,

as I struggled for something to say. "Thank you," I replied as though she were in reality filling an empty bucket with water for some thirsting animal in the desert. My world was looking up as I offered to buy her a second Coke. This is what people meant by rites of passage I supposed—a homerun and a compliment minutes apart, a life-changing couple of moments brought together merely by chance. Playing air guitar to Cheap Trick's "Surrender" or The Knack's "My Sharona" in their entirety, incidentally, did not count. All little boys could and did accomplish this feat with a record player and a 45 rpm—and a thumb which could pivot up and down. I was on top of the world, and everything looked good from this lofty perch. The phrases *beautiful eyes* and *bushel basket* had a profound effect on me. I suppose I let these comments go to my head a bit in that summer after sixth grade. Was there really any difference between playing left field and playing right field? What do nice eyes mean in the grand scheme of things? She offered

only one person's opinion. However, I did notice that things could get very quiet in right field at times. Charley Johnson played that position, and he often could be seen pulling up

daffodils and blowing a green grass harmonica unless a lefty came up to the plate, in which case he seemed very nervous. Was I really carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders in left field? I felt safe in left field, and Coach liked me there; this was mutual respect.

Our team advanced several more rounds, led by our clean-up batter, a young man affectionately known as Dink Huxton and our thirteen-year-old third baseman, Ray Robertson. Thanks to solid hitting, we battled all the way to the finals to face undefeated Lakeview Park, who had been making a mockery of all teams it had faced to this point. For the tournament to be ours, we needed to beat them twice. We surprisingly took them 2-1 in the first game, forcing a final champion-

ship game, and the fact that Coach had put me in left field had pleased me a great deal. After all, I had earned my title as *bushel basket*.

We held a 2-0 lead going into the bottom of the ninth, and our pitching had kept even their strongest batters from getting on base. Lakeview went into the last inning hoping to reverse things. Two men were on base, and their mean-as-a-snake third baseman, the same guy who had an obsession with chewing the gum that I mistook for tobacco, came up to the plate. He didn't need tobacco to be tough. He could not stand still as he looked for the perfect stance, burying his cleats into the defenseless ground with each movement and beating home plate with the bat between pitches. This, I thought, could get ugly. We only needed one more out! I would have loved to have saved the day. Immediately, my fellow players signaled for me to back up—

way back. "I'll tell you when to stop," yelled our third baseman, motioning.

Coach, on the other hand, could be heard saying, "Marshall, come in. I can't hit the ball that far, and I'm a grown man." So of course on Coach's orders I came in a good ten feet, hoping to please our patient leader.

With two strikes on him this callous third baseman drew back and nailed a deep hit far into left field. Was it ever going to drop? I followed the ball with my eyes—no thanks to the sun and the sweat. All I could hear was *beautiful eyes* and *bushel basket*. Would I live up to these words in one of those great defining sports moments? Would they hold me shoulder high? The ball went in and out of sight twice! This final rite of passage was supposed to be everything—the girl, the tourney, revenge, honor, and bragging rights for all of seventh grade. Unfortunately, I was officially *burned*, as they say in the game. To be *burned* is to underestimate the hitting ability of a batter and to have said batter rip the ball far over your head as payback for having sold him short. Coach was wrong!

This man-child had put the ball far out of my reach. By the time I had chased the ball down and picked it up, he was darting around third base, laughing and pointing at me as he hurried home. The game was over—no championship for us.

Immediately after the game, Sally Lou approached me. I was certain that she wanted to tell me that it really wasn't my fault that our team lost although I imagined it was to an extent. Instead, she proceeded to grill me. She asked, "What is your favorite song? Where do you go to school? Will you sign my yearbook? What's your phone number?" The subject quickly became music. "Chuck E.'s in Love" happened to be her favorite song and, at least for the moment, it was also my favorite. I

Somehow, even to this day
I am chasing that shot hit to
deep left field.

tried to focus on the positives. I was not even sure if Sally Lou knew about my error in left field. Inadvertently, she took my mind off of my epic blunder and brought it to the safer realm of popular music. She knew all the words to Raydio's "You Can't Change That" and sang them just to prove it. We exchanged phone numbers, and I made a point of calling her whenever I was at my grandmother's house. This way, it wasn't a long-distance call. I imagined that she was starting to forget about the so called *beautiful eyes*, and I was not about to bring them up. Plus school was about to start! Meanwhile, Coach on occasion still called some of us *bushel basket* even in later years. It gave us hope.

Somehow, even to this day I am chasing that shot hit to deep left field. However, it is not a bad memory, and I am far from bitter. No one was really at fault. We were going for the win, but it was not to be on that day. We must always be on the search for something—praise, triumph, success, or some such goal worthy of its pursuit. Such things kept the summer

interesting. No moss grows on a rolling stone—no moss grows on a rolling shot hit to deep left field either. We shook hands with Lakeview, called it a season, and went to seventh grade as grown men. It was better to have failed in pursuit of some deep shot to left field than to have not had the opportunity to pursue a deep shot hit to left field. This was surely not a bad way to spend the daylight hours of a Saturday in small-town North Carolina, where the local hero would frequently make his presence felt by hitting the game-winner or tagging a player out at the plate so as to save the game. This field had a history of crowning heroes in the summer.

Four summers later, in high school, this same third baseman sat at my table in Fundamentals of Art, one of my favorite high school electives. I could not help but bring up his famous hit one day in class, in the middle of our still-life paintings. He remembered the hit

very fondly, yet he never really rubbed it in that he had had a big day at bat, and I had sold his ability short. He could have gone on and on about his hits, RBIs, and other tournament accolades, but he very modestly smiled, recalled that great day, and returned to painting. I suppose that there is also an unwritten rule honored by those who play this sport: Make light of no one's efforts, for you will soon take the field yourself. I often wondered if he had ever fumbled a grounder hit to third base with the game on the line, but I decided that it would not be kind to ask him for fear of the memories he might have to relive.

Marshall Lancaster eventually hung up his cleats and traded a shot at the pros for a shout at the prose. He is currently English Department Chairman at St. Vincent Pallotti High School in Laurel, Maryland.



Bad Snowball!

A short story by David Ray Skinner

Snowball is bad. I do not like Snowball. I do not hate Snowball, but I do wish I could catch her and make her understand that I know who she is under that silly fur. She may fool everybody, but Snowball does not fool me.

When I caught her in the big room, I held her close to my face with both hands and I smelled her stinky breath and looked into her bad eye. That eye was hurt by a cat a long time ago and it was scary to look into. Her good eye was fine and was as stupid as always. But, I did not like what I saw in her bad eye. The tall lamp in the corner shined into it and I saw wild reflections of

wild men and cave people deep inside that bad cat-hurt eye. Not cartoon cavemen, like in the funny pages, but mean men with wild hair and teeth. They danced around a tall pole—a tree without limbs. They waved sticks with fire around, up and down, back and forth. How did you know cavemen, Snowball? You don't even know what a cave is, Snowball. You have never

wandered past this big room out into the street. Even the cat that hurt you was brought into this big room. It hurt you in your own house. How stupid is that? You were not so tough around that cat, were you, Snowball?

I hate to say this, but the cavemen inside Snowball's bad eye scared me. I dropped Snowball when I saw them dancing around with their sticks of fire and Aunt Sue smacked me hard. Right on my face. Aunt Sue did not understand that Snowball made me drop her because of the cavemen in her bad eye. My glasses came off and Snowball laughed with her tongue out. "Ha ha ha," she said as I crawled across the

Short Story

carpet to find my glasses. My poor glasses. Next time I will try to catch her when Aunt Sue is gone and I will take of Snowball and that caveman for good, I thought.

Today when the doorbell rang along with the tea whistle from the kitchen, I thought, isn't that good how the doorbell and tea whistle know the same note? E-E-E-E-E-E-O! The heating radiator was hissing in the corner. It's like a band in here, I thought. The afternoon sun was shining through the tall windows of the big room and made the glass thingys hanging down from the lamp on the table sparkle like jewels. There were so many pretty colors. There were some colors that I have never seen before. So pretty! Some of the colors didn't even have names. I named them names like redurple and bluereen. There was also long white boxes of light on the carpet like a puzzle. The sun was sneaking into the big room and laying lazy on the carpet like Snowball. I love the big room when things are like this. I hate to have to share it with whoever's at the door, I thought. E-E-E-E-E-E-O!

"KeeKee! Someone's at the door, KeeKee," Aunt Sue yelled. It's always KeeKee something. Wash your face, KeeKee. Drink your soup, KeeKee. Pick that up, KeeKee. Where's Snowball, KeeKee? Kee-Kee-Kee-Kee-Kee-Kee...

"KeeKee! Where's Snowball?" Oh. Aunt Sue really was asking where's Snowball.

I should have told Aunt Sue to go ask the caveman. Ooga-booga. I'm sure the caveman can find that stupid

Snowball. Maybe Snowball is flying on the roof. Did you ever think of that, Aunt Sue? Whoosh! Maybe you need a roof net for Snowball and her caveman. But I did not say that. I am not stupid. I did not want Aunt Sue to grab my face cheeks with her sharp hand and nails and look into my eye like I looked into Snowball's bad eye. So I said, "Yes ma'am. Right away. Thank you!" Then I went off to find Snowball. Oh, you bad Snowball. Where are you? I looked



Did you ever think of that, Aunt Sue? Whoosh! Maybe you need a roof net for Snowball and her caveman.

upstairs in the room where Snowball sleeps. No Snowball. I looked in my room. I looked in Aunt Sue's room. Then, I went bathroom-to-bathroom and closet-to-closet. I know what you are thinking; how could Snowball turn the handle to get into the closet? I do not know. I just know that I have found her in just about every closet at least one time or maybe two times. But now, she was not in the rooms or closets.

Bad Snowball!

Then, I heard voices downstairs. A man was laughing. Aunt Sue was laughing. "Do you want tea?" she asked in her special visitor voice that is not her real voice.

"Oh yes," said the man, "That would be splendid!" Who talks like that?

"KeeKee!" said Aunt Sue loudly from downstairs, "Please bring us some tea!"

"Yes ma'am. Thank you ma'am," I said when I came down the back steps. The water pot was off the stove, but it was still hot enough to hurt when it splashed out of the cups and on my hand as I poured. "Ow!" Aunt Sue had put tea bags into two cups. Hot water bounces off of dry tea bags. When I brought the cups filled with tea in the big room, the man stood up.

"This is Keenah," Aunt Sue said sweetly, still talking in her visitor voice. She did not stand up. Snowball was in her lap. Snowball was laughing at me.

"Hahaha," Snowball said with her tongue hanging out. Bad Snowball.

"Well, hello, Keenah," the man said, "I'm very happy to meet you." He looked nice. You could see the top of his head through his hair. He had a tie on. He held a brown

hat in his hands. The hat had a band around it and a small feather stuck in the band. Hey mister, what bird gave you his feather to stick in your hat? I bet he needed it more than your silly hat needs it. I hope he can still fly without his pretty feather for your silly hat. The man's tie was bright red with white diamonds on it. Ha. The diamonds were not real. They were just printed on the red tie. I'm sure the

man knew this. He did not look stupid, but that bad Snowball was laughing at one of us. Maybe she was laughing at the feather in the silly hat.

I'll bet Snowball would not have laughed if I poured the two teas on her head. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Snowball," I would say, "I did not mean to pour tea on your snowball head. Oh, your poor curls are hanging down like brown noodles now, aren't they?" But I did not pour the tea on Snowball, so I never got to say the part about the brown noodles. I don't know what Aunt Sue or the man would have done to me, but I do know that it would be something I did not want to happen. Still, it would sure fix that stupid Snowball. Bad Snowball.

"KeeKee, this is Mr. Miller," Aunt Sue said as she took away the tea from me. Maybe Aunt Sue knew what I was thinking, because she was sure in a hurry to get the teas away from me. "Say something nice to Mr. Miller. We're all going to be great friends!"

Oh yeah, that's going to happen, I thought.

"Say there, Keenah," Mr. Miller said, "Miss Sue has told me quite a bit about you."

"Thank you," I said.

"So, what do you like to do, Keenah?" Mr. Miller asked. "Do you like to go to the picture show?"

I wasn't really sure what the right answer was and Aunt Sue just sat across from him smiling with Snowball on her lap. "KeeKee likes to help me take care of Snowball. Right, Snowball?" Snowball just laughed with her stupid tongue hanging out. Was she laughing at me or Aunt Sue? Aunt Sue, Snowball is laughing at you! Or maybe Mr. Miller. Who knows. Stupid Snowball. Bad Snowball.

"Say Keenah, we were all thinking about taking a little fun trip," Mr. Miller said. "How does that sound?" He was smiling, but he was wiping his face with a white handkerchief. If I squinted from where I sat across the room, his tie looked like a big red tongue hang-

ing out of his face. Just like Snowball. Only his tongue had little diamonds on it, like sharp little white tongue blisters. Bad Snowball! Poor Mr. Miller caught a bad tongue disease from you, you bad bad girl! What's next, you bad girl? Will you make his hair turn white and curl around his ears like your fur? Oh, I wish I poured the tea on you to turn your pretty white curls into ugly brown noodles, you stupid Snowball.

"Well, how about it, Keenah?" Aunt Sue was saying. I guess they had been talking to me while I was looking at Mr. Miller's tongue-tie. "Wouldn't it be fun to ride in a taxicab? Keenah? Keenah?"

"Thank-you," I said.

"Thank-you, what?" Aunt Sue asked, this time not in her visitor voice. I knew she was starting to lose her happy voice.

Mr. Miller was in a uniform. A policeman? An army man? I do not know. It was a blue uniform and he had a fancy hat. It did not have a feather.

"Thank-you, ma'am," I said. I have a visitor voice, too.

"No, KeeKee. I meant, wouldn't it be fun to ride in Mr. Miller's taxicab?" Aunt Sue said, pretending being nice. What a pretender.

"Thank-you, ma'am," I said.

"Very well," Aunt Sue said, "Go upstairs and get some things together in case we want to spend the night."

"Mr. Miller's taxicab has a bed in it?" I asked.

Mr. Miller turned red like his tie, but Aunt Sue just started getting mad. "KeeKee. Get your toothbrush and your pajamas and some extra clothes. Go on, now." "Thank-you," I said.

I climbed the back stairs and made my way up to my room and started putting things together. Toothbrush. Pajamas. Mr. Wiggles, my furry bear. Underwear. Pants. Shirts. I knew this was going to be really good or really bad, but I didn't know which. Isn't that funny how things go? Something made a noise behind me, and I saw a

white blur out of the corner of my eye. "Come here, Snowball," I said as sweet as I could. She was behind my desk. I got down on the floor and crawled slowly across my floor, pretending to be playing with Mr. Wiggles. I think Snowball knew what I was up to, but I moved so slow and was talking to Mr. Wiggles, so I think she lost interest. Stupid Snowball. When I got close enough I grabbed her before she knew what hit her. Didn't know I was that fast, did you, Snowball. She squirmed and looked around for Aunt Sue, but Aunt Sue was downstairs with the man talking in her visitor voice. Oh, you bad Snowball. Aunt Sue can not hear you! Ha! You are not laughing now, are you, Snowball!

I leaned up against my bedroom window and held Snowball in front of me with both hands. The big sun was low down behind the city outside, but I knew it was still cold, because I could see the white smoke from the chimneys curling up into the air like Snowball's fur. I held Snowball tight so she could not

get away and turned her head so the sun would shine in her eye...her bad eye. Now, who's laughing, I thought. But then, something moved from deep inside Snowball's bad eye. I held her close and smelled her stinky breath. And there were those wild cavemen. Just as I thought. This time I looked closer. The tall pole was there, but so was Aunt Sue and Mr. Miller. Aunt Sue was beautiful. She was wearing a sparkly gown like you see in the picture magazines. Mr. Miller was in a uniform. A policeman? An army man? I do not know. It was a blue uniform and he had a fancy hat. It did not have a feather.

There were many cavemen. They were all wild with ugly hair and sharp teeth. They all had sticks with fire burning and they were dancing around the tall pole. They were wrapping Aunt Sue and Mr. Miller with thick vines and tying them to the tall pole. Aunt Sue and Mr. Miller were scared. I was scared, but they did not seem to notice me. Maybe I was invisible. "KeeKee!"

Short Story

Aunt Sue screamed. "KeeKee! KeeKee, where are you?!"

Mr. Miller screamed, too. "Keenah! Keenah! KeeKee!" It is sad to be scared when you are all dressed up in a sparkly gown and a uniform. You should be happy and brave. But what was I supposed to do? I do not know how to handle cavemen! Aunt Sue and Mr. Miller were saying something else, but I could not hear what they were saying because the cavemen were shouting. I think the cavemen were singing. I did not know that song, though. I do not speak caveman.

Then I saw a blur of white. Snowball! How did you get inside your bad eye?

The cavemen were petting Snowball. The cavemen liked Snowball! Well, don't that beat all! They put a flower hat on Snowball's head. The flower hat had a feather in it. There was Mr. Miller's hat feather! Why don't you ask the cavemen to give you Mr. Miller's

I think the cavemen were singing.
I did not know that song, though.
I do not speak caveman.

tie, too? Snowball laughed and laughed with her tongue hanging out. "Ha ha ha," she laughed. Oh, Snowball, I do not like you! Bad Snowball!

"KeeKee! Where are you?!" Aunt Sue screamed, but I could not hear her. I

only saw her mouth move and knew that's what she was saying. All I could hear was the cavemen singing as their sticks with the fire came together in one big yellow-white glow. The glow got brighter and brighter, so bright I had to cover my eyes. Even with my hand over my eyes, the brightness spilled in around my fingers, so I did not even know which way to look, so I just dropped to the ground. I could feel something soft beside me and I heard the "Ha ha ha" and smelled the stinky breath and knew exactly who it was. You may have these cavemen fooled, but you...do...not...fool...me.

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The Camping Parachute

by Kim Megahee

Camping out. Sounds innocent enough, doesn't it? From the time I was a little kid, I'd always had a romantic notion about sleeping outside and "roughing it." Not that I have done a lot of it or am really any good at it. It's just the idea, I guess. Where does it come from? I don't really know.

Maybe it was the TV shows that were popular when I was a kid. I was born in 1951, so the TV Western was ubiquitous during those formative

years and the cowboys were always sitting around the campfire singing and talking about important stuff. Or maybe it was just the idea of being able

to stay up late and see what really happens during the night.

When my brother Davy and I were finally able to convince our parents that we were old enough to camp out by ourselves, we had a grand adventure planned. Who knew that it would be the scariest adventure of my young life?

We grew up in Warner Robins, Georgia, where my dad had set up and developed a small dental surgery

practice. Warner Robins started life as a small community in middle Georgia named Wellston Junction, but had the great fortune to be founded right next to the future site of a huge USAF base. The base became Warner Robins Air Material Area (or WRAMA), then finally Robins AFB. We lived there during the height of the Cold War, so we woke up in the morning to the sound of B-52's taking off in the early mornings (which was pretty amazing, considering that the base was about two miles from our house). Warner Robins was very hot in the summer and we were about 50 miles south of the "gnat line", so I spent half of every summer spitting out gnats that committed suicide by flying into my mouth or eyes.

We moved there when my dad finished dental school at Emory University in around 1953. My uncle was a civilian employee for the Air Force there and he convinced my dad that he should start his practice there. As I understand it, the argument for it went something like this—"Marcus, there's only one dentist here and he's a jerk." So we moved to Warner Robins, or "WR," as we locals have always referred to it.

Anyway, I spent my first few elementary school years living on Dewey Street in Warner Robins. It was a small house on a tiny lot, but to us, it was huge. My brother and I had our own room so we didn't have to put up with our little sister Laura, who was down the hall.

But we couldn't wait to camp out. We kept after Mom all the time, trying to talk her into letting us do it because, after all, I was nine years old and Davy was eight. Mom was patient with us, but just wouldn't have any part of it.

About this time, the TV series "Ripcord" came out. It starred Ken Curtis (also known as Festus in "Gunsmoke") and Larry Pinnell. It was our favorite show. Now that I think of it, how in the world did they come up with enough plots related to skydiving to keep the show going for

an entire season? But there was great excitement about parachuting back then and, being near a military post, this excitement was intensified for us as little kids. At a time when most kids dreamed of being firemen and cowboys, we dreamed of being a daring parachutist. So, it takes very little imagination to realize that owning a parachute would be a status symbol among kids in good ol' WR.

Of course, parachutes back then were a far cry from the ones we have today. Today's parachutes are more like wings that can be steered and controlled to a great extent. Today's paratroopers can jump from high altitudes and land pretty much exactly on target. But back then, the parachute was much more like a big, upside-down fabric cup that captured air and

We boys have eternally been drawn to dangerous and stupid activities that we have to try at least twice before determining, yes, they are indeed dangerous and stupid.

slowed descent, but offered very little control and lots of danger. Maybe that was the attraction. After all, we boys have eternally been drawn to dangerous and stupid activities that we have to try at least twice before determining, yes, they are indeed dangerous and stupid. It amazes me that our species has survived.

It all started when some kids down the street got the first parachute on our block. As of that moment, every other kid on the block was green with envy and totally without status. We all raised such a hue and cry that all the parents on the block were calling in favors from their friends who worked on the base to get a parachute.

What were they good for? Not much really. These old, retired canopies were generally used on the base to provide a little shade on Armed Forces Day or any other public events. In truth, they did provide enough shade to take the bite out of the direct sunlight on those hot summer days, but that was about it. Most of the folks in the neighbor-

hood used the parachutes for that purpose. Kids all over the street played underneath the family parachute, sheltered by that symbol of adventure and danger.

But not Davy and I. We envisioned an altogether different use for that parachute. We saw it not as an exciting reminder of skydiving, but as a potential tent. After all, how can you camp out if you don't have a tent?

This was our ticket. If we could somehow get a tent, we'd be that much closer to getting to camp out. We lobbied Mom relentlessly. We brought up all the advantages.

After all, the parachute provided protection and cover if it rained, right? Now that I think back on it, I wonder how Mom kept a straight face to that argument. Have you ever been under a parachute when it rains? It might be better than being out in the rain, but I can't imagine in what country or on what planet that might be true.

What about protection from wild animals? Well, I understand that our backyard was a veritable jungle, but we were more likely to be bitten by a spider or a tick than a wild critter in that yard. The most vicious animals in our yard were squirrels and the occasional garter snake.

But my mom was like most moms. She listened patiently to all our arguments and nodded at the right time, but the answer was always "No, you're too young to camp out".

Then one amazing day, she weakened and said, "Well, let me ask your father." That response was better than a flat "no," but was always a little disconcerting. When Dad got involved, things were always a little unpredictable. Sometimes, it was great, because Dad was a guy and would get excited with us. Other times, though, he would put his foot down and the issue would die an instant death, never to be mentioned again.

As I look back on it, I don't ever remember my Dad being unfair with us. In that era, dads were generally

authoritarian, but my dad was a little different. He would usually have a pretty good explanation when he turned down an idea. The truth be told, he generally would allow us these little adventures while he, behind the scenes, would control the scope. And so it was with the parachute.

To make a long story short, we soon had our very own parachute. It was orange and white and enormous. It was much bigger than I thought it would be, and we draped it over our swing set. Voila! Instant tent. Who needed a fancy fort or playhouse to support our imagination?

We spent many, wonderful hours playing under that parachute. It was Army HQ and the base of many a game of Army with our friends and neighbors. It was also the bunkhouse of Roy Rogers' ranch. It even served as the "Flying Crown Ranch" when we played "Sky King." We were out there every day that summer, making the most of that amazing gift.

But we never gave up on our original plan. We wanted to camp out. And wonder of wonders, Mom eventually relented and announced that we could do it. So we started planning.

Of course, we had no gear. Dad got to "camp out" plenty when he was in the US Army, so he had no real interest in camping at that time—certainly not enough interest to spring for equipment. This changed later, but that will have to wait for another story. So we made do with what we had. Under the parachute, we flattened a refrigerator box that we "rescued" from a neighbor's trash collection. On top of that, we laid out some quilts that Mom had allowed us to actually take outside. And of course, we had our pillows. I mean, we were roughing it, but what kid can sleep without their pillow?

So it was finally decided that we could camp out on a Friday night. Normally, we had to be in the house by 6:00 PM and in bed by around 8:00 PM. But this night, we came in for dinner

and then marched down the back steps and out to the back of the yard where our parachute dominated the scene. I remember Davy and I marching out, armed with our pillows and quilts, feeling very independent and manly. Mom came out to tuck us in. She made sure that we were all covered up, with the quilts tucked around our little bodies and comfortable. Dad stuck his head in to tell us to stay in the tent and not to go walking around (which, of course, had not occurred to us until he mentioned it). Then he went back inside. Mom stayed for another few minutes and then went inside.

Of course, we immediately got out of the covers and sat cross-legged in the tent, talking about the day and how great it was to be camping out. After

"Kim! Davy! I think y'all had better come in now. We just heard on the news that a lion has escaped from the circus in town."

all, it was soon after 10:00 PM, which was my standing record for staying awake (I had tried to stay awake to watch "Maverick" on TV a couple of times, but never made it). We talked for a while, solving the secrets of the universe, as boys are ever wont to do. We realized that we were missing a key camping-out component—a fire. After a brief discussion, we realized we didn't have any firewood or matches, so we gave up on the idea.

Then, things began to go south. We heard noises from the back door and heard Mom calling out to us.

"Kim! Davy! I think y'all had better come in now. We just heard on the news that a lion has escaped from the circus in town."

We stepped out of the tent and looked at the back porch. There she was, standing in her nightgown and robe, looking out at us. Now, I have to ask you—what self-respecting young boy in a small town in Georgia doesn't know when the circus is in town? And the phrase "There's no circus in town..." spilled from my lips. But I

didn't have time to dwell on it.

From the back of our yard came a mighty roar. Davy and I both spun around just in time to see a silhouette leap into the air.

Pandemonium ensued.

Generally, I was bigger and faster than Davy. But I was unable to get out of his way as he spun back around and crashed into me in his haste to get away. He ran over me like Herschel Walker did linebackers. I hit the ground and immediately came back up. I may actually have bounced, because I don't even remember being on the ground.

I glanced again at the bounding silhouette (which looked somewhat familiar at this point, but not enough to register in my brain) and immediately started running. Even as little kids, we understood the first rule of animal pursuit—"I don't have to outrun the lion—I just have to outrun you." So I spun around to dig in to escape.

I didn't get fully turned around to make my escape before I discovered a tree. The hard way. I had just started moving, but I hit it so hard that I staggered backwards a few steps. But, I was beyond scared. Actually, I was pretty far into the "terrified" range. Nothing could have stopped me in my quest for the safety of our back porch. It never occurred to me that a lion would never be deterred by something as trivial as a back porch.

I dug in and made tracks. It is a tribute to my speed that, despite my time spent with the ground and the tree, I still beat Davy to the back porch by a couple of steps. I was shocked to see my mom grinning at us. Then I looked back at the lion, which had disappeared, only to be replaced by my dad, who was holding his sides and laughing as hard as I had ever seen.

I think Davy and I both cried, more from relief than anything else. Mom took us inside and dressed our wounds, calmed us down, and put us down in our own little beds. Dad went back out to collect our bedding and brought it in.

It was a couple of weeks before we mentioned camping out again. Dad eventually bought a real tent and we left it pitched in our back yard all summer, spending many nights out there “in the wild.” There were a lot of neighborhood kids that circulated through that tent as our campout guests over the years. Lifetime friendships were forged in that tent.

Now, you might be thinking, “Poor kid! He was probably traumatized for the rest of his life because of that.” That seems to be a prevalent thought these days. But I never saw it that way. My dad and mom both had a marvelous sense of humor and that is a gift that they gave to me, Davy, and Laura.

I also have to say that they helped me to not take myself quite so seriously. I learned that it’s OK to be the butt of a joke every now and then. It doesn’t hurt and shows people that you are human. It also teaches you how to be a good sport and to be a little less naive. Life is going to “whack” you every now and then, and if you don’t learn how to take the bad with the good and bounce back, then you are going to be miserable your entire life.

Some people think “The Man” is out to get them. I’ve found that, most of the time, other people don’t think about me at all—they are too busy worrying about their own problems. It seems to me, the world would be a much happier place if we worried less about what the other guy is trying to do to us and more about taking responsibility for our own lives.

I’ll always remember that night. It’s been almost 50 years since then. Dad and Davy are both gone now, and I miss them. Mom and Laura are still here, thank God. But I will never forget the “Lion of Dewey Street” and the camping parachute.

Kim Megahee wasn’t born in Atlanta, but he got there as quick as he could. He lives there with his wife and the final two unlaunched kids. He also plays bass in the classic rock trio “Shot Too Nabby.” He is currently working on several stories, including a science fiction novel about time-travel, murder, and a doomed love affair.

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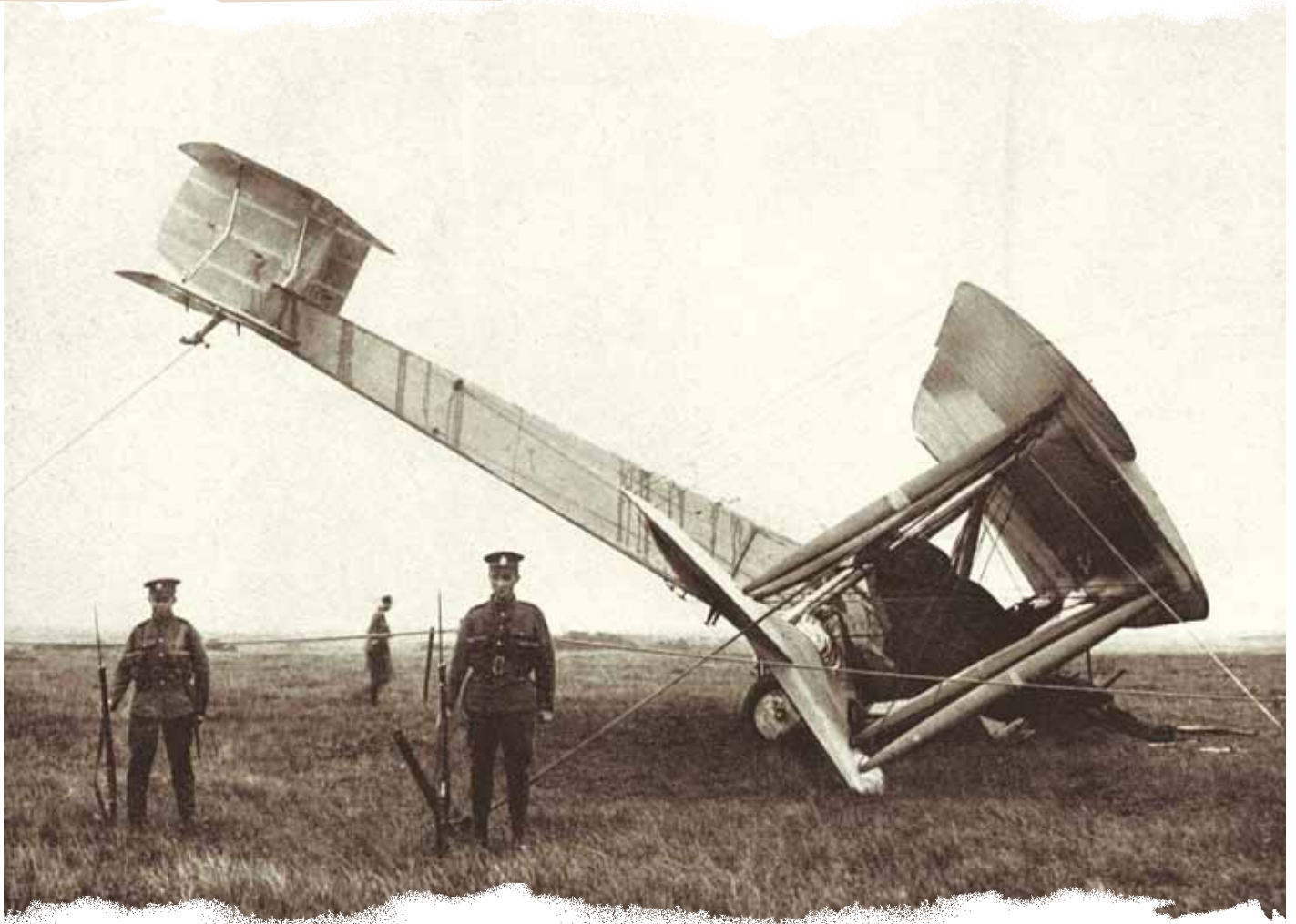
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Curse You, Red Baron!

by Ron Burch

I'm an airplane nut; always have been. Even as a kid, much of my meager allowance was spent on model airplanes...inexpensive kits you built yourself. Tiny replicas of real airplanes patiently made from balsa wood covered in tissue paper and painted in bright colors.

Whenever I had a jingle in my pocket, I'd ride my bike to the corner five-and-dime and look at the pictures on the boxes. Perhaps I'd choose the fighter like John Wayne flew in a war movie I saw the previous Saturday. Or maybe a B-24 Liberator like Jimmy Stewart flew in one of his twenty real combat missions over Europe. Regardless of which one I chose, when I'd opened the box I would be sadly disappointed when what fell out

looked nothing like the picture.

The structural components that would form the backbone of the airplane came printed on a sheet of balsa wood. Each piece had to be carefully cut out with a razor blade and then sanded to the exact shape of the printed outline. Cutting out all the parts took a lot of time and a lot of razor blades.

To give shape to the exterior, strips of balsa wood called stringers were

glued to the structural elements. Then the ribbed skeleton was covered with tissue paper and painted. It took a lot of patience and a lot more skill than I possessed. Perhaps for that reason, while I bought a lot of models...I never finished even one. As soon as it became clear that my ham-fisted finished product would bear little resemblance to the picture on the box, I gave up.

But I still loved airplanes.

If I begged long and hard enough, my dad would occasionally take me down to Candler Field—the old Atlanta Airport near Hapeville—and let me watch all the big silver birds take off and land. If I'd been especially good, he might drop a dime in the pole mounted telescope so I could get a

closer look. Heck, as much as I missed him when he was away, getting to go to the airport to see him off almost made it worth it.

As a teenager, I spent a lot of time in front of my shortwave radio hoping to hear a voice from a control tower or a cockpit...any control tower or any cockpit. However, since the frequencies used in aviation communications are limited to line-of-sight, hearing anything but static required me to take my radio to a spot near an airport. So, once I began driving, I spent many a Sunday afternoon at one of a half dozen general aviation airports in the area.

A summer job while I was in college got me even closer to the action. A co-worker I'll call Chuck was a private pilot. Every weekend when the weather permitted, he went flying. Every Monday morning he told us about it. I was entranced by his experiences and marveled at his flip-pant use of aviation lingo. I was eager for him to ask me if sometime I wanted to go along.

Finally, the invitation came.

On a brisk November morning in 1967, Chuck and I met up on the tarmac at the DeKalb-Peachtree airport where dozens of brightly painted airplanes sat parked, secured to mother earth with pieces of heavy rope attached to long runs of cable fastened to the concrete. When I arrived, Chuck had already opened the doors and untied the ropes holding our airplane.

I had to pinch myself...I was about to go flying! I watched intently as he performed what he called a "pre flight inspection."

"Brrr, it's cold," said Chuck. He shivered as he wiped the oil dipstick on a paper towel, placed it back in the filler tube and drew it out again. Satisfied that the engine had plenty of oil, he pushed it back in.

Chuck nodded in my direction, winked and put his gloves back on. He motioned for me to hop in. "Ron, throw your jacket in the back...this

thing will warm up pretty fast." He was right. By the time we'd taxied to the end of the runway, the little four banger under the cowling was pumping out plenty of heat. In fact, when we reached an altitude of about 1,500' it was almost too much. It wasn't long before Chuck reached down and pushed a knob labeled "cabin heat" back to "off" position.

He looked at me through his Ray-Bans and shouted over the roar of the engine, "What a beautiful morning." And it was! A severe clear and beautiful November morning. Even though it was a little chilly, thanks to a light wind, there was no lift-robbing frost anywhere on the wings of the tiny bird.

Chuck was a member of a flying club. Its members shared the expense of flying and maintaining the club

flying" but soon we began a rapid descent toward the trees beneath us and the clearing beyond.

He turned the airplane 90-degrees to the left and to my surprise, we were lined up with a grass strip three or four hundred feet below. A couple of minutes later, we softly touched down in grass that was almost as tall as the wheels. Chuck applied power and we taxied the length of the runway toward a rustic farmhouse where smoke trailed from the chimney. The smell of coffee filled the air.

"Ron, meet Dodgie."

"Dodgie, meet Ron"

We exchanged pleasantries and then Dodgie introduced us to several other guys sitting around the pot-bellied stove.

"How 'bout some coffee?" said Dodgie.

"Absolutely!" Chuck replied. He got a cup of the thick, black liquid and poured one for me. Then we took a seat by the crackling fire and joined in the conversation.

William "Champ"

Champion and Dodgie Stockmar, the owner of the Flying S Ranch, were engaged in a heated exchange. The town of Villa Rica was growing. If not now, sometime soon a developer would want to buy the land where the farm house now sat adjacent to the 4300' grass runway lined with tall pines.

Rumor had it that if the offer was good enough, Dodgie was going to sell both the ranch and Stockmar Field. No one—especially Champ—wanted that to happen. Why? Stockmar Field was a trip back in time. Back to when nearly all general aviation airports were grass strips. Back to when they were no control towers, no air traffic controllers and no restrictions on airspace. Back to when if you owned or had access to an airplane, you were free as a bird to fly when and where you pleased. Back to when the only regulations for operating an aircraft were common sense. Matter of fact, commencing in the 1920s, the Regulations for Operating an Aircraft were simple.

Soon the concrete and steel of the city was behind us; in front of us, simply the rolling hills and forests of West Georgia.

planes with their monthly dues and rental fees. My buddy was treating me to my first ride in a small airplane... one of two tiny Cessna trainers owned by the club.

We took off to the northeast out of DeKalb-Peachtree Airport in the North Atlanta suburbs. We climbed and then made a turn toward the south. We flew over the city and then turned west-bound toward Birmingham.

I was all eyes. The view from our altitude was fantastic. I was a little surprised at how noisy it was and how quickly I became disoriented. Nothing looked the same from the air as it did on the ground. Soon the concrete and steel of the city was behind us; in front of us, lay the rolling hills and forests of West Georgia.

After a few minutes of trundling along enjoying the sights, Chuck pointed toward a clearing a few miles ahead and motioned "down there." He pulled on the throttle and reduced the power to idle. The little bird coughed and shuttered as if to say, "I'm not through

1. Don't take the machine into the air unless you are satisfied it will fly.
2. Never leave the ground with the motor leaking.
3. Never take a machine into the air until you are familiar with its controls and instruments.
4. No machine should taxi faster than a man can walk.
5. If the engine fails on take-off, land straight ahead regardless of obstacles.
6. Do not trust altitude instruments.
7. Before you begin a landing glide, see that no machines are beneath you.
8. If flying against the wind, and you wish to fly with the wind, don't make a sharp turn near the ground. You may crash.
9. Learn to gauge altitude, especially on landing.
10. Don't attempt to force a machine onto the ground with more than flying speed. The result is bouncing and ricocheting.
11. If an emergency occurs while flying, land as soon as possible.
12. Never get out of a machine with the motor running.

My pilot-friend should have set those 1920 regulations to memory. For when we tried to depart Stockmar Field, he flunked #1 big time. He did, however, pass #5.

Slowed by the tall grass, Chuck pulled back on the stick a little too soon. The nose wheel lifted up, but instead of quickly establishing a positive rate of climb, the airplane wallowed. At about hangar height, the stall horn blew and the little bird came crashing down hard on the nose wheel. Still traveling at 40 to 50 mph, the airplane went off the end of the runway, tumbled end-over-end down a sharp incline and ended-up on its back with the fuselage practically broken in half. Miraculously, neither of us sustained injuries. Matter of fact, Chuck's Ray-Bans didn't even come off!

As we hung upside side suspended

in mid-air by our seatbelts, a red faced Chuck leaned over and said, "Well, Ron, you can now say you've been in an airplane crash." Always the clown, Chuck unbuckled his seat belt, opened the door, grabbed onto the strut and pulled himself out. He stood-up on the underneath side of the crumpled wing and looked skyward. He waved his fist and shouted, "Curse you Red Baron."

I didn't laugh. But as ridiculous as it sounds, I was hooked. Hooked on flying.

Three years later and after ten months of training, I received my private pilot's license. Later I added an instrument rating. Over the next twenty-five years, I owned three airplanes and accumulated over 2500 accident-free hours.

To the best of my knowledge, Chuck, my co worker and friend, never flew again. And Dodgie? He kept the Flying S Ranch. He also kept the coffee hot for Champ and all his buddies that gathered every Saturday morning 'round the pot-bellied stove.

But unfortunately that's not the end of the story.

In May 1999, Dodgie and Champ were both killed in a freak aircraft accident. An experienced Airline

straight down. He said the engine was running and the airplane remained in the nose down attitude until it collided with the terrain.

The National Transportation Safety Board found as follows: "After take off the airplane was observed by the tower controller to enter the downwind leg of the landing pattern. The controller attended to other traffic and when he looked back for the airplane, it had disappeared. Examination of airframe, flight control assembly, engine assembly and accessories revealed no evidence of a pre-crash mechanical failure or malfunction."

In their final report, the NTSB determined that the probable cause of the accident was "an in-flight loss of control for undetermined reasons, resulting in an in-flight collision with trees and the ground" – fancy government lingo for an airplane crash. The crew that gathers 'round the old pot-bellied stove at the Flying S believes there's more to the story.

At the crash site, the elevator trim was found in the full down position. The manufacturer of the aircraft kit knew that the elevator trim was capable of three times the necessary amount of downward trim for normal flight. The factory claimed it had sent all registered kit owners a service bulletin stating that they should return the entire control yoke unit to the factory for modification. However, some kit owners weren't

notified of the defect. Somehow their serial numbers were not included in their database – including Champ's plane, serial number 5043. The mandatory modification was never made and it cost the lives of two great guys.

The loss of a father, a grandfather and a dear friend was difficult for the Champion and Stockmar families to deal with. Not to mention the impact it had on the hundreds of friends who knew and loved them.

Just like the models I built as a kid, kit planes are an affordable way to get a new airplane. They're a great project for family and friends and pro-

Chuck leaned over and said, "Well Ron, you can now say you've been in an airplane crash. Let's get the heck out of here in case this thing burns."

Transport Pilot and Instrument Flight Instructor, Dodgie was administering the FAA-required biennial check ride to his best friend Champ. They were flying Champ's newly built kit plane, tail number N75419. Two witnesses observed the airplane in the vicinity of Charlie Brown Airport west of Atlanta. Both stated that the airplane was in straight and level flight a few hundred feet above the trees. One witness said he saw the nose of the airplane pitch up about ten degrees, before it pitched straight down and disappeared from view. The other witness said he observed the nose of the airplane pitch

Southern Flying

vide two or three years of supper table discussions. In 1998, Champ's kit-built airplane had won an award for Outstanding Workmanship. He had gone to every extreme to have a new, safe and reliable aircraft to last a lifetime. Unfortunately, for Champ and Dodgie, that lifetime lasted only 70 flying hours.

Stockmar Field has changed a lot since that day. However, a memorial to Dodgie and Champ still marks where the old grass runway used to be.

Many would argue that there is inherent danger in flying small airplanes with a single engine. So why do we do it? Why do folks like Champ and Dodgie and me take such a risk? A little poem called "Men Who Fly"

hangs on a plaque in my office. Perhaps it explains it best:

"The little boy on a grassy hill
Who sees the hawk and
knows the thrill
Of the summer wind
on an upturned wing,
And the joy a graceful flight can bring.
There was a dream in this boy's eyes
That reflected the challenge
of distant skies.
The passing of time and
the graying of hair—
But the eye is still sharp,
and the light is still there.
And he sees, as he scans,
the far blue sky,
A dream that is missed
by the passerby.

Where, as far as his eager eyes
could see,
The air was clean and
the sky was free;
Where the hawk soared high on the
summer sky,
And the boy imagined he was there."
—Author unknown

I'm sure if Dodgie and Champ had been as fortunate as Chuck and me, they too would have climbed out of the wreckage, looked skyward, shook their fist and exclaimed, "Curse you Red Baron." They would have then walked away, and like the little boy standing on the grassy knoll, dreamed to fly another day.

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WALL DECALS



Each sheet is made of tough vinyl with a temporary adhesive back and includes multiple decals. They can be removed and reapplied several times. Available at your local WalMart, or you can go online to GoFanz.com to find decals of your favorite teams.

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