

# Southern Reader

AN ONLINE MAGAZINE ABOUT LIFE IN THE SOUTH

## The 'Almost Last' Mission

*High drama over the South Pacific*

## Next to Godliness

*Keeping it clean*

"Melon-choly"

## Last Bus to Georgia

*With time to spare, go by air*

## Dallas Frazier

*A leap of faith*

## Chickadee

*A pet to crow about*

## Scales of Justice

*Tracking the weight of fairness*

## Travels With Harley

*Where there's a will...*

## Willy Wonka Grape

*A tale from South Georgia*

## On the 01' 97

*A memory from the Arkansas ricefields*

## Forbidden Island

*An excerpt from the novel*

## Visiting George

*The spirit of a famous hollow*



# Of Love and War

This year is a wartime anniversary year. It's the sesquicentennial—the 150th anniversary—of the firing on Fort Sumter, the kick-off to our country's celebrated Civil War. It's also the 70th anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, which, of course, lit the fuse on America's plunge into World War II.

I grew up in suburban Nashville, but my parents, grandparents, and great-great-great grandparents settled and farmed the land northwest of Nashville, up along the Kentucky border. My

mother was born on the banks of the Tennessee River, close to the ruins of Fort Henry, and she grew up in Dover, on the banks of the Cumberland, a stone's throw from Fort Donelson, Grant's (and the Union Army's) first major victory over the Confederates. Fort Donelson is where U.S. Grant got his nickname "Unconditional Surrender" at the expense of 12,000-15,000 Confederate soldiers who became POWs for the rest of the war.

My father and his people lived fifteen miles or so to the east, between Dover and Clarksville, in a farming community called Jordan Springs (Jordan was pronounced like "burden" with a "J"). When Tennessee joined the Confederacy, the men of Jordan Springs who were old enough to enlist, traveled by mule—or by foot—to Clarksville to enlist in the 14th Tennessee

Volunteer Infantry. The 14th Tennessee was organized in May of 1861 and immediately received orders to transfer to the Virginia theater, where they served with bravery and distinction in virtually every major battle and campaign conducted by Robert E. Lee.

Their tenacity, however, came at a high price; of the nearly 1,000 officers and enlisted men that served with the 14th, only 40 were still alive after Appomattox. They lost more than half

cabin during their march from Dover to Nashville. One of them, however, felt sorry for the screaming baby and asked if she could be moved closer to the fire to keep her warm.

And, because of the decimation of the 14th Tennessee, the hard times continued for that part of the state after the war and for years to come. There were only a handful of Confederate vets to advise my grandfather as he left Jordan Springs for France and World

War I, and even less—if any—to share wartime stories around the community store's woodstove with my dad and his cousins, who were born in the '20s.

That morning in December of 1941 had started off just like any other Sunday in Jordan Springs. My dad had gone to church with his family and had taken off to the woods after the service to hunt rabbits with his friend John. He had no way of knowing that in a few short years he'd be trading his rifle for M2 Browning machine guns in the rear turret of a B24 in the South Pacific, and he'd be shooting at much larger prey, and they'd be shooting back.

That afternoon, when he and John came in from the fields, there were cars, trucks and tractors surrounding his family's house. Electricity still hadn't found its

way to Jordan Springs and my grandparents had one of the few radios in the community—it was powered by a truck battery. On Saturday nights, the friends and kinfolks usually came over to listen to the Grand Ole Opry on the radio, but people gathering around the



**Just like the previous generations of Jordan Springs boys when war came, Dad enlisted. Crewmates called him "Little Skinner"; their short and stocky pilot, Lt. Jasper Skinner, was "Big Skinner."**

of their men at Gettysburg alone.

Times were hard for the area during the war. My dad's grandmother was a baby during the Civil War, and in the cold winter following Grant's victory at Fort Donelson, Union soldiers forced their way into her parents'

## E-Publisher's Corner

old radio on a Sunday afternoon was cause for alarm—in this case, they were gathered to listen FDR's solemn announcement about the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

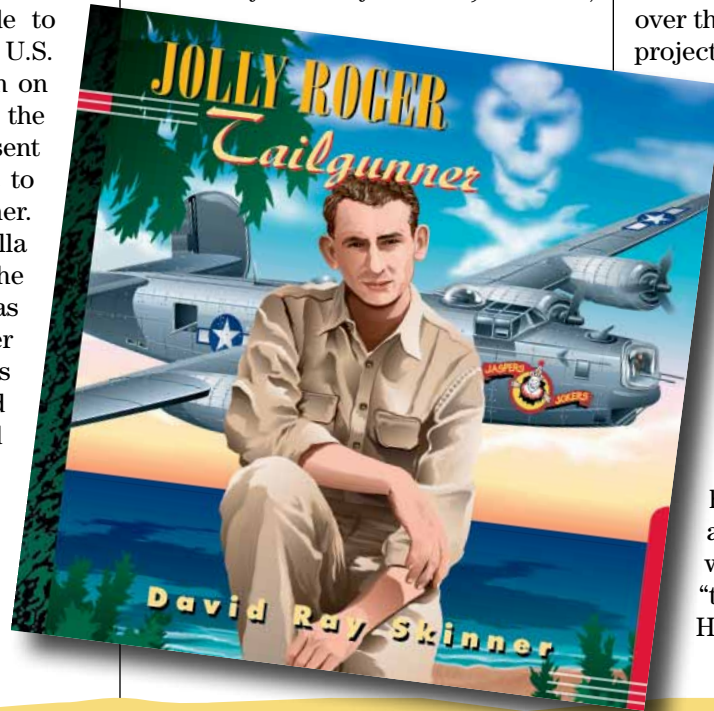
Just like the previous generations of Jordan Springs boys when war came, my dad caught a ride to Clarksville and enlisted in the U.S. Army. He scored high enough on his entry exam to qualify for the Army Air Corps and was sent to gunnery school in Florida to learn how to be a tail gunner. He was eventually sent to Walla Walla, Washington, where he met his future crewmates, as well as his pilot, Lt. Jasper Skinner. The last name was the only thing the two had in common; Lt. Skinner had been raised across the country from Jordan Springs on a farm in Nebraska, and he was short and stocky, whereas my dad was tall and lanky. The crew called my dad "Little Skinner" and Jasper "Big Skinner."

My sister and I were born in the happy post-war years of the 1950s, but it seemed the war loomed constantly in the background like a big storm cloud that had just passed. All

of my friends' fathers had served in the war and all of the deacons in our little church had served. It seemed like a grand and glorious party that everyone still acknowledged, but wouldn't talk about. Here's the sad irony: we all tended to take the war and the sacrifices of our parents' generation for granted.

When I was about ten, my dad showed me his squadron's "yearbook." In the front of the book, there was a picture of Major Stanley Robeck and an inscription attributed to him. When I first saw his picture, I figured Major Robeck was just another guy who didn't come back from the war. The full story, however, is a little bit more revealing. My dad's pilot, Jasper Skinner, had named his crew (and plane) "Jasper's Jokers." The nose art

on their plane was a clown busting out through the fuselage of the B24. His plane and squadron were part of the famous "Jolly Rogers." The logo on the tail was a pirate skull and crossbones, only the bones had been replaced by bombs (this logo was also on the cover of my dad's yearbook). At ten,



Over the next four years, Jasper became the 'technical advisor' and sounding board for 'Jolly Roger Tailgunner,' the tribute album I wrote and recorded for my dad.

I thought the logo on the back was very cool, but I was a little embarrassed by the clown on the front. One of my friends's fathers had flown in a plane with nose art depicting a sexy woman chasing a little Japanese fellow with a hatchet; I thought that was so much cooler than flying with the nose art of a clown jumping out of the side of the plane. It would be years before I would truly appreciate the twisted irony of the happy little clown punching his way out of a war plane armed to the teeth with ten .50 caliber M2 Browning machine guns and loaded down with 8000 pounds of bombs.

After my dad passed away in 1997, I started working on a tribute to him, his crew, his squadron, bomb group, and for that matter, my parents' entire "greatest" generation. The

project would soon take the shape of a concept album about my dad's wartime experiences, called "Jolly Roger Tailgunner." Going through his papers, I found some information about his "Jolly Roger" crew, including Jasper Skinner's phone number in Nebraska. I called Jasper and introduced myself over the phone and told him about the project.

Over the next four years, Jasper became the "technical advisor" and sounding board for "Jolly Roger Tailgunner." He also provided photos of the crew and the plane, along with reflections of that time in the Philippines. During one conversation, I mentioned that Dad had seen one of the planes from their squadron shot down right in front of him. He had said that he knew the guys on the plane, and saw their faces as the plane went down. "Yes," Jasper replied, "that was Stan Robeck's plane." He then filled in the blanks.

On March 2, 1945, they were flying a raid over Formosa, and the squadron leader was Major Robeck. After the first pass over the target, Major Robeck's plane took a flak hit and he radioed back to

Jasper that they were going to drop out of formation and bring up the rear so as to not slow down the other planes. "Jasper's Jokers" were currently in that slot, so when Robeck's plane pulled back, Jasper relinquished the rear to the major. As soon as the major's plane pulled up into formation, it took a direct hit in the bomb bay and went down in flames. "Thirty seconds earlier," Jasper said, "we had been in that exact position." It's not exactly an "It's a Wonderful Life" kind of event, but had that switch not occurred at the point it did, there would have been someone else telling you this story, and it's anyone's guess as to what exactly would be occupying the SouthernReader.com domain.

I knew Jasper's voice and handwriting had steadily been declining the



last few years, but I was still surprised when he passed away at the first of this year; he had always seemed bigger than life. We had hours and hours of conversation since that first phone call in 1998, and I was grateful to be able to stay in touch with one of America's greatest. He loved "Jolly Roger Tailrunner" and appreciated the way Jordan Springs was woven into my dad's story. Jordan Springs could just as easily have been his farm in Nebraska, he told me.

As for Jordan Springs, ironically, it no longer existed when my dad returned from the war; the government had bought up the entire farming community and built Camp Campbell, now called Fort Campbell, it's home to the Army's 101st Airborne Division and the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment. In his longtime career with the Air Force, Jasper flew into Fort Campbell on numerous occasions.

A few years ago Jasper sent me a story that he had written called "The 'Almost Last' Mission," which detailed another close encounter with disaster that Jasper's Jokers had experienced. We're publishing it in this issue of Southern Reader. I feel like I owe it to Jasper and to my dad and to all of the soldiers, from Jordan Springs to Lincoln, Nebraska, to keep their memories and their stories alive. So, here's to you, Dad; here's to you, Jasper; and here's to you, Jolly Rogers; thanks... for everything.

**David Ray Skinner**  
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# Travels With Harley

*Where There's a Will...*

by Lisa Love

*Based on actual events—only the names and the facts have been changed.*

**T**

he latest saga in “*The Lisa Chronicles—Bed, Bath and Beyond*” began when I got a call from the coroner in a town in south Georgia—we’ll call it *Smallville*—informing me that my Great Uncle Harley had passed away three days before. This call was as odd as it was unexpected.

The coroner informed that after purchasing about \$197 worth of Gladware disposable containers, my uncle had died of an apparent heart attack in the bathroom of the Dollar General. *Um-m-m-m*. After dropping that nugget of information on me, he asks if he can put me on hold while he takes another call, and as I wait, my mind harkens back in time.

Ah, Harley Shelnutt—as is the tradition of all things Southern, there is quite a tale to tell here. Harley, though three years her junior, was my mama’s uncle—my great grandmother’s “late in life” baby, as they called him. Great Grandmother Shelnutt was 55 years old when he was born, so the raising and disciplining of Harley frequently fell to his older sister, my grandmother.

Because of their closeness in ages, my mama and Harley were reared as pseudo-siblings; sharing toys, vacations, and the family’s affections. From the time he was just a little tyke, Harley yearned for the best life had to offer, and since he was born during the Great Depression, he was perpetually disappointed. He was strikingly handsome, and he possessed a lovely singing voice—once even appearing on “*Stars of Tomorrow*” with Dinah Shore. That one brief appearance became his only claim to fame. However, since his penchant for song was taking him nowhere, my uncle joined the Army. When the Korean War ended, so did Harley’s army career. He was now free

to indulge his love of travel, taking to the open road. He once told me that his life's goal was to visit every state in the continental United States at least twice before he died.

We saw him sporadically until I was in first grade or so—then his visits just ceased. I was left to wonder if some kind of a falling out within the family had occurred. I never knew for sure, as his name was only uttered in harsh whispers that coincidentally ceased whenever I entered a room. I probably thought that his penchant for traveling kept him too busy to visit us, however, Harley loved to write, routinely sending letters, postcards and pictures documenting his treks. I returned the favor, (*I love words, ya know!*) sending cards and letters to the P.O. Box number my uncle provided, keeping our tenuous bond intact through the years.

The coroner returned to the line, his voice startling me from my trance into yesteryear. He inquired as to what I would like to do with the body of my uncle. Huh? I told him that my uncle had no immediate family and, as the out-of-town great niece, I was out of my depth here. He advised me that cremation would be most appropriate in this case, and that I could pick up his *cremains*—yes, that is the official term—in two days. Okay. I asked him if I could give him my credit card number to expedite matters (*yes, I really talk like that*), and when we were done with the transaction, he wanted to know if I had any questions for him.

After a slight pause, it occurred to me that I couldn't fathom how he knew to contact me for the notification. He gave me a quick explanation—well, the *Reader's Digest* condensed version of it anyway. Seems that after Harley died in the bathroom of Dollar General, he was taken to the county hospital to be pronounced DOA. After the pronouncement, the coroner went back to the store to ask the employees some questions and go over the scene. The cashier informed him that they

assumed my uncle was a homeless man or was down on his luck as he was dressed rather tatteredly, appeared to have no teeth, and perhaps, lived out of his car. *Oh no, I thought, not my gorgeous Uncle Harley!* She, Pattie the cashier, did remember him buying a crazy amount of disposable containers and a bottle of aspirin. He proceeded to pay in cash, and then carried his sacks out to his car, placing them in the trunk. She saw him get in his car and sit in the driver's seat for a few minutes before coming back in and heading for the bathroom. When he didn't come out for quite a while, they knocked and received no answer. Opening the door, they saw him slumped in the floor and called 911.

After hearing her story, the coroner

**"Never in my life have I ever seen anything like this," he said, "Heck, I've never seen anything like this in a movie either, come to think of it."**

and the store manager went through my uncle's car and discovered basically every letter and card I had ever sent to Uncle Harley—all filed in a laundry basket in the passenger front seat. They noted my return address, Googled me and got my number. I offered a silent thank you to Al Gore for inventing the Internet—*otherwise I would never have gotten such a timely notice of my uncle's death!* One thing I took note of as the coroner spoke; he seemed almost—how shall I say this—*mildly excited*.

He was a little breathless, and his words tumbled out, one over the other, like a waterfall of words. Well, maybe that's just his style, or maybe they don't get many people keeling over dead in the Dollar General bathroom, I pondered to myself. His final words just confused me more: "Ms. Love, I can't wait for you to get here. You are never going to believe everything I have to show you. Never in my life have I ever seen anything like this," he said, "Heck, *I've never seen anything like this in a movie either, come to*

*think of it.*" Huh? He tells me to be there Saturday and to be prepared to pick up not only my uncle's cremains, but also his car.

I immediately hung up the phone and telephoned Diane—my best friend, quasi-sister and partner in crime for over 40 years. When she answered, I yelled into the receiver, "Road Trip!" Without missing a beat, she replied "Heck, yeah." I'm sure there was mild disappointment when she found out we weren't headed to Hilton Head or Vegas, but instead, we were going to pick up my dead uncle...but hey, she's nothing if not a good sport!

She and I started our four-hour pilgrimage to south Georgia at about 6:00 A.M. on a beautiful Saturday morning. The air was crisp, the cruise control set and the GPS activated; this would have felt like a *Thelma and Louise* adventure (*minus careening into the Grand Canyon, of course*) if we weren't bringing home the cremated remains of my long-lost great

uncle. We chatted, we sang with the oldies, we ignored the GPS—it hates when I refuse to follow its directions to the letter. A side note here—when I first got the GPS, I programmed it to speak with a male German accent. It makes me giggle to be corrected by Colonel Klink from Hogan's Heroes—"*Recalculate, recalculate, Fraulein!*"

We reminisced, as much as we were able to, about my great uncle. Since my last visit with him was when I was six, it made for rather slim pickings on this walk down memory lane. But I *DO* remember a few things—he was absolutely breathtakingly handsome, when he sang—if you closed your eyes—you would swear it was Frank Sinatra, and most importantly, he didn't treat me as if I was invisible. You know what I mean. Typically, adults have a way of looking past a child in the room for someone more worthy, more interesting to talk to. Not Uncle Harley. He would sit beside me on the sofa, throw his arm around my shoulder and actually *CHAT* for hours! He was so warm and funny with me. I adored him. We



would talk about such inconsequential silly things really, but it was delightful to a little girl. Once he looked at me, very seriously, and whispered conspiratorially, “Lisa, how do you manage to get your finger up your nose to pick it?” I have always had the tiniest of noses, and he picked (ha, ha) right up on my lifelong dilemma. I scooted up close, proudly proclaiming, “I have to twist my finger up my nose like a corkscrew, Uncle Harley.” I then demonstrated my technique to him and he laughed until he cried. Gross, perhaps, but he had endeared himself to me—oh, and the chocolate-covered cherries he brought with each visit never failed to delight a little girl. And to think that sweet, dapper man had died alone in a Dollar Store bathroom. Sigh.

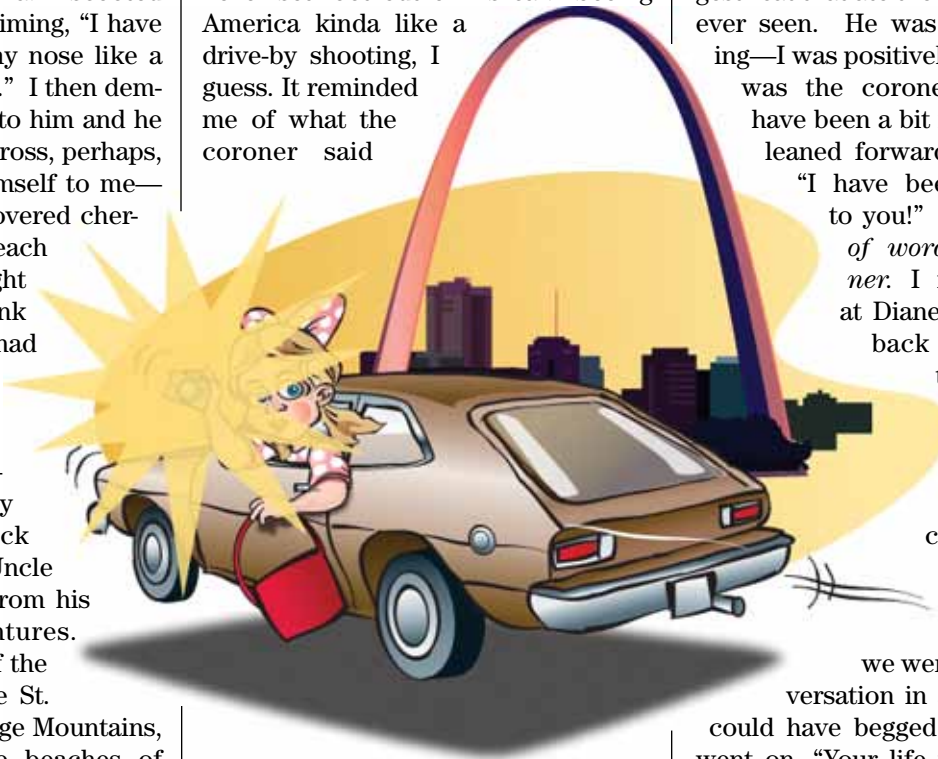
We hit Macon—Diane’s turn to drive—and I brought out my manila envelope chock full of the old photos Uncle Harley use to send us from his cross-country adventures. There were snapshots of the Golden Gate Bridge, the St. Louis Arch, the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Grand Canyon, the beaches of Florida...shot after shot. As they never failed to do, Harley’s pictures brought a smile to my face once again. Through my growing years, these pictures had fueled my own wanderlust—I dreamed of a day when I would hitchhike cross-country and experience all the beauty my country had to offer.

As we slowed down to find a gas station, I flipped through each photo again, one by one. As I intently studied the pictures, something struck me. *How had I failed to notice this all these years?* I looked, and I looked again. As we pulled into a Chevron station (angering Colonel Klink once again, “TURN AROUND NOW!”), I spread the pictures out on my lap and asked Diane to take a look. “Notice anything odd about these?”

She perused them a while and shook her head, “They look like ordinary vacation shots.”

I laughed, “Not exactly. Look again. *Not one* of these pictures—and there

were SO MANY—was taken outside of the car. EVERY shot was from the inside of Uncle Harley’s car. You could see a side mirror here, a rear view mirror there. Oh look, a steering wheel in front of the Golden Gate Bridge. WOW!” It occurred to me that Uncle Harley may have spent his life traveling the country, but it would seem he never set foot out of his car. Seeing America kinda like a drive-by shooting, I guess. It reminded me of what the coroner said



about it looking like my uncle lived in his car. Maybe he did. Can you say eccentric? No, on second thought, if you are quirky AND rich, then you get to be eccentric. If you are a regular Joe and quirky, you merely rank “odd.” Odd, indeed.

We left our pit stop at the gas station, and got back on the road. In a little more than an hour, our friendly German tour guide announced that we had arrived. Yep, there was the Smallville mortuary before us. Diane asked, “You think this is the right one?” I’d think the chances are pretty slim that there’d be TWO funeral homes in this little town. The parking lot was deserted, so we parked right next to the entrance.

As we exited the car, the front door swung open, and I heard, “Are you Lisa? Glad to meetcha—I’m David.” I was taken aback; I don’t know what I expected. Jack Klugman as Quincy, I presume. This boy—excuse me—

this man—had to be twenty years my junior and was decked out in full University of Georgia regalia—Bulldog cap and sweat shirt. He would have made Vince Dooley proud—*Go Dawgs!*

With an offer of coffee or bottled water, he ushered us into the inner sanctum of the funeral home, his office. As he sat down, he broke into the biggest “cat that ate the canary” grin I had ever seen. He was positively beaming—I was positively frightened. This was the coroner? Shouldn’t he have been a bit more somber? He leaned forward and whispered, “I have been dying to talk to you!” *Wow, bad choice of words from a coroner.* I furtively glanced at Diane. We both leaned back in our chairs, teetering away from him, very wary.

He smiled bigger and continued, “Ms. Love, today is your lucky day.” Considering that we were having this conversation in a funeral home, I could have begged to differ, but he went on. “Your life will never be the same.” Dave the Coroner nearly leapt across the table as he burst out, “I couldn’t wait to get you here today! I almost called you and spilled the beans, but I didn’t think you would believe me without the proof.” *GET ON WITH IT, MAN!*

“Ms. Love, when the paramedics were trying to revive Mr. Harley Shelnut, they removed his jacket and threw it on the floor of the bathroom. Later, when we were trying to get an I.D. on your uncle, the store manager and I went through his jacket’s pockets.” He halted for a nanosecond, looking into my eyes to gauge my understanding, prolonging his dramatic “*Lifetime Made-for-Television Movie*” moment. Just as I was about to jump out of my skin with impatience, he said, “Ms. Love, in those pockets were papers, lots of papers. There was paperwork, documenting your uncle’s ownership of over \$10 million worth of CD’s in about 50 different banks

throughout the Southeast. *Harley Shelnut was loaded.* God rest his soul, and no disrespect intended, of course.”

“What?” I stammered, “I thought you told me he looked like a homeless man, raggedy, no teeth. Lived out of his car? I don’t understand any of this. *WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?*” I quickly scanned the room, looking for hidden cameras, just knowing Alan Funt was going to jump out and yell, “Smile, you’re on Candid Camera!” Oh—that reference really dates me. Okay, rather—*Ashton Kutcher jumps out and shouts, “You’ve been Punk’d!”* There, hip status officially restored.

As I raked my hand through my hair to smooth it for the non-existent TV cameras, Dave the Coroner deftly pulled out a calculator, spread the bank documents in front of me and set out to do some calculatin.’ Page after page, he punched in the numbers with the skill of an accountant and an expression that was pert near jubilant. This must have been the most exciting thing to happen in this town since—well I don’t know of anything exciting that ever happened in

Smallville. But I digress...after twenty minutes of adding the reams of papers, he slid the calculator across the table to show me the total: *\$12.3 million dollars.* I was flabbergasted. He winked at me and whispered, “*Lisa, you just won the lottery.*”

Aside from noticing that I was “*Lisa*” now, I noticed something else as well. *Right before my eyes, Dave the Coroner transformed into Dave the Estate Planner!* “You know, Lisa, your life is going to change after today. First, I’d keep this to myself, if I was you. Fewer people that know, the better. Don’t want ’em coming out of the woodwork, trying to part you with this money. Now, I’m pretty sure a guy with all that money would have a will put away somewhere. And you seem to be the relative with the most contact with him, through your letters and such. I would bet dollars to donuts that you are his heir. But, worst case scenario,

and you can’t find a will, you’d just divide it with any living heirs. Now, you said that there wasn’t any wife, children or living parents when I called you Tuesday. You’ll need to contact any of your kinfolks related to Harley. First, go home and get you a good lawyer. *You are gonna need it, girl.*”

Wow, he had said all that with barely taking a breath. As I rose from my chair, my legs were trembling like a new foal trying to stand for the first time. Still not totally sure I wasn’t being “Punk’d,” I crammed the bank files in my purse and headed for the exit door, shell-shocked. I heard his voice call out, “Don’t forget your uncle.” Dang it, *I forgot Uncle Harley.*

The coroner approached me with a white cardboard box and placed it gingerly in my hands. *Wow, Uncle Harley was heavier than I thought he’d be.* I patted the box and offered a silent goodbye to my uncle as Dave guided

**I was flabbergasted. He winked at me and whispered, “Lisa, you just won the lottery.”**

me out the side door of the funeral home to my uncle’s white Taurus. To get his car home, Diane and I had previously decided that I would drive Harley’s vehicle, and she would follow in mine. But, as David walked me to the car and opened the passenger side door, I saw (*and smelled*) immediately why he assumed that my uncle might have lived out of this car. With the exception of an index-card sized empty spot on the driver’s side seat, the car looked like an episode of “Hoarders.” Only worse...more like “*Hoarders Gone Wild!*”

And the smell! *What can I say about the fragrance?* Imagine a cat litter box that no one had ever bothered to clean. *Well, I wished the car smelled that good.* And, that wasn’t the only issue; in addition to the smell, there were piles and piles of *STUFF* from the floorboard to the roof of the car. In the front and back seats were bags of groceries,

and baskets of clothes, and boxes of books and papers were crammed into every available space.

Diane and I popped the trunk only to find more of the same, *PLUS* Uncle Harley’s last purchase at Dollar General—bags of Gladware containers. You know, earlier I mentioned that if you are peculiar and a regular Joe, you are just “odd,” but if you are unconventional and rich, you are *eccentric?* Well, after seeing this car, I decided that if you looked up *eccentric* in *Webster’s Dictionary*, it would have Harley Shelnut’s photo. Now, back to that odor—*where was that smell coming from?* I was (*and this was very unusual for me*) at a loss for words. It had been a long, eventful day. I was tired, couldn’t think straight, and wouldn’t even know how to begin to put the pieces of this puzzle together.

As I shoved into the driver’s seat, I contemplated the long drive home, just as David crouched by the driver’s window and handed me a zippered leather satchel containing all of Harley’s personal effects. I hastily flipped through the contents—rings, watch, wallet and a

motel key. A receipt from the Dew Drop Inn, a motel in town, fell out of my uncle’s wallet. It looked like he rented a room—*Room 222*—six days before. *Hmmm.*

Dave took it from my grasp, looked it over, and told me that this place rented rooms by the week and was only about four blocks from the funeral home—he thought I should go there and see if there were any more important papers in Harley’s room. I knew he was trying to hint that I should begin hunting for the will among Uncle Harley’s possessions, but I was exhausted. I tried to formulate some kind of a plan. I thought that perhaps Diane and I should just stay there for the night, do some looking around, and start back home to Atlanta fresh in the morning. Plus, I would have given anything for a hot bath and a comfy bed right about then. When I mentioned this to Coroner Dave, he looked horrified. “I don’t think you’ll be wanting to stay overnight



there. Promise me, *PROMISE ME* you won't stay the night," he warned ominously.

Okay, 'nuff said. He gave me quick directions to the motel, as well as his cell number in case I ran into trouble. *Another ominous warning?* I thanked him profusely for taking the time to find me. He truly had gone above and beyond the call of duty, even to the point of advising on my next steps in this *Uncle Harley* saga. I believed this coroner was one of the last of the *Good Guys*. I put the car in drive, threw him a smile filled with gratitude and told him, "Dave the Coroner, if there's ever anything I can do for you..." As I pulled out of the parking lot, I spied him waving his Bulldog cap in the air as he yelled, "*Season passes to the Georgia games, PLEEEASE!*"

As I tried to maneuver the unwieldy Taurus (which we affectionately dubbed "*The Tenement on Wheels*") out of the parking lot, I glanced

at my side mirror (the only mirror I can see through) to make sure Diane was right behind me. Catching a glimpse of my uncle's *cremains* box teetering on top all my letters to him in the old laundry basket in the back seat, a thought hit me and I abruptly slammed on the brakes. I was *NOT* going to carry my beloved Uncle Harley around in what basically amounted to a white cardboard cake box. It was absolutely undignified and did nothing to honor his memory—besides, in just the short walk to the car, I found the box heavy, cumbersome, and difficult to carry. I got out of the car and headed back to Diane. She shrugged a silent "*huh?*" and I motioned her to roll down the window. "Hand me our insulated lunch cooler sacky thingy," I told her. (It was actually a red retro Roy Rogers insulated vinyl lunch tote.) She said if I wanted a water, *couldn't I have just waited two minutes until we got to the motel?* I just smiled at her and proceeded to unload the water bottles into the front seat of my car as I told her, "I want Uncle Harley to go in here. That

box he's in is depressing and flimsy. Let me go try this out."

She gave me that look that I know so well after all these years. It was her "*Fine, here we go again with me playing Ethel to your Lucy*" look. I walked back to Uncle Harley's car with the red insulated vinyl lunchbox in hand. Picking up the pitiful white cremains cake box with both hands, I squeezed and maneuvered it into the bag. He just barely fit, but he *did* fit, by golly! It wasn't a great solution, but it was a timely one, and at least it looked cheerful. Proud of my ingenuity, I squeezed myself back into the car and headed for the motel.

On the short drive to the Dew Drop Inn, I found myself building castles in the sky...I dared to dream that Coroner

...I could build a girls' school in Africa with my name emblazoned across the front of it...

Dave might be right. It appeared that *Uncle Harley was a MILLIONAIRE!* Wow! *AND* he did keep every letter I had ever written him beside him on the front seat of his car. That had to mean something, right? What in the world would I do—*could I do*—with all that money? I mean I was no financial expert, and I'm sure a lot would have to go to cover estate taxes, but even so, I would still have more money than I could have ever dreamed about having. I could build a girls' school in Africa with my name emblazoned across the front of it and then have the media take pics of me in front of it to let the world know what a selfless, humble philanthropist I was. *No... Oprah beat me to that.* Well, I *COULD* donate to all the worthy causes I already supported, and do even more for them. I could pay off mortgages for members of my family, help out dear friends, buy a new car and maybe take a cruise or two to somewhere exotic, *AND* still have enough left over to be financially secure for the rest of my life. I could hear my Mama's voice

in the back of my head telling me not to count my chickens before they hatched; heck, I wasn't only counting them, *I was building them a fancy four-door chicken coop*—well, technically, four doors would make it a sedan, but that's neither here nor there. Point is, *I WASTHISCLOSE* to being a Southern Belle Socialite.

Four minutes later, with Diane right behind me, this Southern Belle Socialite wannabe pulled into a place that would have made the Bates Motel merit a substantial upgrade. Decrepit wouldn't begin to do it justice. People were loitering outside their rooms, sitting in lawn chairs and swilling bottles of beer. They eyed us suspiciously as I parked Harley's car in front of Room 222. Diane pulled into the spot beside me. We simultaneously rolled our windows down and stared at each other, telepathically transmitting that we both wished to heck we were packing heat right about now. If it looked this bad from the outside, I could

only imagine what lurked behind that door. Locking Uncle Harley's car—as I noted that some of the fine residents of Dew Drop moving in a human convoy towards the Taurus—I made my way to his room, put the key in the lock, and pushed the door open.

OMG! The smell knocked us both back a foot; it was almost like running into a wall built purely of landfill stench. It smelled like rotting milk left out in the sun on a summer day surrounded by dirty diapers, with a hint of mildew and mustiness thrown in just for fun. I wish I had "*scratch and sniff*" technology available here just to share.

Anyway, as I walked in, a roach scurried over my feet and I shrieked. Looking around, I couldn't tell if the place had been ransacked, or if this is just how Harley left it. Half-eaten food on the dresser had become a banquet for ants and roaches. Clothes were strewn everywhere; papers were on every horizontal surface. So much for a hot bath and a comfy bed—Coroner Dave's warnings were now fully understood. Would we find any-

thing of import in this disaster zone? Yes, that's what it looked and smelled like. *A disaster zone!* And I couldn't forget that I still had to search through the contents of Uncle Harley's car, as well. Where to start, where to start?

After a quick look around the room, I then took my time to really examine the surroundings and many things hit me at once—a half-eaten cup of Ramen Noodles and saltine crackers on his nightstand sat by a tepid cup of water in a Styrofoam cup. Behind his last supper, propped up by the phone, was a banged-up picture frame with a photograph of me and my Mama—I believe I sent this to him three Christmases ago. Tears stung my eyes, and for a minute, the room was but a blur.

I wiped at my eyes with the hem of my shirt—the only clean thing in Room 222. I crouched down by the side of the bed—still not wanting to sit on anything in the room—and looked at papers strewn across the unmade

bed. Pamphlets, flyers and brochures covered the sheets. Before I picked up one to read, Diane returned from my car with handfuls of Latex gloves, plastic garbage bags and liquid hand sanitizer—I never go anywhere unprepared—*my Girl Scout training, I guess*. Diane looked around at the filth that was this room and proclaimed, “Honey, Latex gloves aren't gonna cut it here. We need way more protection—I'm thinking head-to-toe, *full-body* condoms!” I laughed, but certainly couldn't argue with her logic.

I spread a garbage bag on the bed like a tarp, put on the gloves, then reached for one of the pamphlets. It was a shiny, glossy ad for a *Lifestyle Lift*. *A facelift at 78 years of age?* The second brochure (*with prices handwritten all over it*) was for dental implants. Another brochure was for the *Hair Club for Men*. Well, it looked like Uncle Harley had some plans to *renovate*, so to speak. Then I noticed interspersed with the brochures were maps—California, New Mexico, Florida...about 20 to 25 state

maps. And then I saw the pictures—more photos of landmarks, all taken from the confines of his car. My heart broke. Was he too ashamed of his appearance to get out and socialize? Had he become a hermit (albeit, an isolated hermit that loved to travel)? I studied his bed with all the evidence of the new life he planned. New teeth, new hair, new face, more traveling—and yet he lived in filth, existing on Ramen noodles and water? Surrounded by all this misery, I started crying again. When Coroner Dave told me about the money Uncle Harley left behind, I was already planning cruises and LASIK and lipo (*oh, did I fail to mention those in my earlier dream sequence?*), yet my uncle, with all his apparent wealth had chosen to live as

**My cellphone rang, and it was Diane. “We brought the stink with us!” she screamed.**

a pauper. I felt dirty and greedy and tremendously sad. I needed to get out of that room. *IMMEDIATELY!*

“Diane, let's just grab everything and shove it into the garbage bags and stuff them in my car. We'll go through everything when we get home.” For the next hour, we put papers into suitcases that we found in the closet, and took all of his clothes (after checking the pockets, of course) and offered them to the male residents of the motel who were still surrounding Harley's car (and who, by the way, had been watching us through the room's blinds for the past hour). I made the executive decision that they were just harmless, curious men, down on their luck. They were greatly appreciative of all the pants and shirts we handed them. We stuffed my car to the gills—trunk, front seat, back seat. It now bore a familial resemblance to Uncle Harley's car. As Diane started my car, I went back into Room 222 for the last time. With one final glance around the room, I whispered, “I'm sorry”—to whom or for what, I'm not exactly sure. I laid his

motel key on the nightstand, quickly scooped up the photo of Mama and me, and rushed back to the awaiting Taurus.

As I quickly programmed my GPS to get us home, Diane and I began our convoy back to Atlanta. While adjusting my seat belt, my cellphone rang. It was Diane. I glanced in my side mirror to see if she was all right. “*We brought the stink with us,*” she screamed. She told me that the smell from the motel room was now permeating my car and she was going to throw up.

I racked my brain for a solution. “You know, it's 6:00, and we haven't had a bite to eat since dawn.” I told her, “Why don't we stop someplace, eat dinner and take a minute to regroup in a place that doesn't reek of dead animals on the side of the road...” She readily agreed, and when I spotted an IHOP a half mile up the road, I turned into the parking lot. Since this wasn't a part of our driving plans to Atlanta, my GPS went wild—

I now thought I knew what Hitler sounded like during a hissy fit. *Holy Schnitzel!* I turned it off, grabbed Uncle Harley and we headed in to eat. Diane wondered aloud if the stink had possibly attached itself to us, so we first headed for the rest room and washed our hands with scalding water and as much hand soap as we could pump.

We ordered coffee and pancakes and started to talk strategy and make lists. We are notorious list-makers—*if it's not written down, it ain't gonna happen*. Diane knew a lawyer I might want to use, so she Googled him and got his phone number from her cell. I then called him and left a voice-mail, giving a cursory explanation of what I had encountered in Smallville and asked him to call me. *Okay, one down*. The waitress brought our meals, refilled our coffee and noticed my insulated cooler on the bench beside me. “Oh, you brought your own bag for leftovers. How smart of you!” Hmm. So I smiled and said, “No, that's my uncle and he didn't get out to restau-



rants much, so I thought I would bring him to IHOP as a treat!" She went white—yeah, I thought, I'd better leave her a really good tip. I then went on to explain our situation, and finished with how we really just stopped in to breathe some fresh air *AWAY FROM THE CARS!!!*

She excused herself for a minute, then came back and said, "My manager said why don't you girls drive around back to the dumpster and pick through the cars here. It's still light enough to see, and if you're there much later, the streetlight is right by the dump. That way, at least you can get the trash part thrown away and not have to take it all home with you." *God bless small towns and their residents!* You forget how great people can really be when they see a need. We thanked her and took her up on her offer. After leaving a very generous tip, Diane, Harley and I headed to the cars and pulled them both around back.

We put on the gloves and decided to start with Harley's car first—it seemed to smell the worst.

One by one, we lugged out boxes and laundry baskets, methodically going through everything, piece by piece. The papers had mildew on them as if perhaps rain had found its way into the Taurus—they seemed to be the source of the moldy, musty smell. I started to sneeze, and my eyes watered. Wishing I had brought Benadryl with me, we decided to file the important papers in the cleanest of the boxes we could find. There were bags of garbage in the back seat—*real garbage*—that looked like it had been there for weeks. What was clearly trash was thrown into the dumpster, papers were studied before they were filed. Slowly, the piles got smaller and smaller.

After about 45 minutes of our *search and rescue* mission, we found a white garbage bag loaded with full Gladware containers. These weren't the new ones he had just bought that were in his trunk—*these were clearly full of*

*something*. It seemed that the odor in the car might be emanating from this sack and these containers. Maybe he had food in them that had spoiled. I carefully popped the lid to one, to peer inside. *BIG MISTAKE!* Diane's earlier idea of needing a head-to-toe body condom wasn't far off the mark. Actually what was needed now was a haz-mat suit and an enclosed breathing apparatus, because inside that sealed Gladware container, and yes, *in all of the Gladware containers*, were Uncle Harley's soiled underwear.

Okay, I was done. I just wanted to go home. My pancakes and coffee nearly made a re-appearance in the Smallville, Georgia IHOP parking lot right then and there. *Uncle Harley, WHY???* I am reassessing that "eccen-

I carefully popped the lid to one of the containers to peer inside. **BIG MISTAKE!!!**

tric" label once again. I don't care how much money he was sitting on, this wasn't "odd," nor did it qualify as "eccentric." Keeping your dirty drawers in airtight sealed containers (*that are supposed to lock the freshness in, by the way!*) just ranks as "*BIZARRE!*"

Diane started chucking all the sacks with the dirty underwear containers into the dumpster. We then started a flinging frenzy. If it was paper, we put it in the file box; everything else was dumped. We then went through my car with all Harley's possessions that were in Room 222. It was now past dark, and we huddled under the streetlight that illuminated the parking lot. In the paperwork from his motel room, we found title deeds to land he used to own, starting as far back as 1951, and the bills of sale to the same lands when he sold them. It appeared that he had owned property in McDonough and Decatur, Georgia, as well as quite a bit of property in Florida. These papers explained much. I knew traveling the country didn't pay well, so turns out Uncle Harley had invested

in real estate. I was proud of him—though admittedly still thrown by the fact that he saved his nasty underwear in Tupperware. *Shesh.*

It was way past 10:00 P.M., and after going through every paper with the upmost care and attention, we still had found no will. Knowing we still had a four-hour drive home, we called it a night and put the three boxes with the papers we wanted to keep back in Harley's trunk—alongside all that new Gladware he had bought right before he passed. I shudder to think about the plans he had had for those containers. Anyway, before we left IHOP, Diane and I popped back in for a quick thank-you to our waitress and her manager for the use of their dumpster. They handed us coffees in to-go cups and told us to drive safely. *Sweet!*

After a day I will never forget, we finally headed home—Harley and me in the lead, and Diane behind us, listening to the oldies station all the way home. I didn't even turn the GPS on; I thought that being yelled at would have been the straw that might have broken this camel's back. It was peaceful, the drive back home with my uncle sitting beside me in the red retro Roy Roger insulated vinyl lunch tote. He was resting on letters I had written him when I was just a little girl, and he was my singing, dashing uncle who brought me chocolates and conversation. That night, we were where he loved to be the most... in his car, traveling the open road. It occurred to me that, for the first time ever, I was traveling with my Harley.

On Monday, the attorney, Mr. John Thompson, returned my call, and we agreed to meet the next afternoon. He instructed me to bring all the paperwork that I found in the car, the motel room and at the coroner's (I also took Harley with me, just to make it official). When I met him, I liked him immediately. Mr. Thompson—he kept telling me to call him John, but I am just too Southern—inquired about known living relatives, and I gave him the list of the two cousins in North Carolina—

they too, were both a great niece and great nephew to Uncle Harley. Mr. Thompson said that his assistant would notify them of Harley's passing, and of my intent to retain him as counsel in this Estate matter. He went on to say that after he received the official death certificate, he would seek to be appointed Administrator of the Estate. This would give him the power to have all of Uncle Harley's banks open any and all safe deposit boxes he might have rented from them to possibly find the will. But he told me if there is no will found, my uncle will have died "Intestate"—without a will, and the laws of Georgia would govern how the money would be divided. Because he had no immediate family, we—the nephews and nieces—would divide the estate equally.

Mr. Thompson's paralegal, Amanda, took tons of notes during our meeting, then looked at me and smiled. "We have never dealt with a case as interesting as this one. This is quite a unique situation you have found yourself in, isn't it?" If she only knew...as in all Southern families, we don't air our dirty laundry in public (although, it would appear, some of us like to store it in Tupperware for safe keeping). Obviously, I had not shared the more, shall we say, *CRAZY* aspects of Uncle Harley's life with the attorney. My Nana used to say, "If it ain't pretty, don't put it on your front porch." So, I had chosen to tell them the wonderful things I remembered about my uncle and just to gloss over the rest. As our hour came to an end, I signed the retainer papers and turned over all of Harley's documents to Amanda. Mr. Thompson came from around his desk, put his arm around me and told me, "Your life is never going to be the same, young lady." Wow, I thought, he's been talking to Coroner Dave.

It was a long four months of waiting, and waiting some more, for news from the attorney's office. It wasn't his fault per se, it was just the red tape and bureaucracy of death. There

were death certificates to file, and a probate judge to find. No judge wanted to oversee this case, because jurisdiction was an issue—my uncle had no permanent address, only a P.O. Box, thus no city or county to call his home. Finally, after weeks of wrangling, Mr. Thompson got the judge in the county where Harley had died to adjudicate his Estate. Also, weeks and weeks of searching all the banks for safe deposit boxes seem to prove fruitless, and the lawyer prepared me to be ready to have the Estate divided three ways. Well, it wasn't going to be \$12.3 million, but I decided I could happily live with a third. I would just downsize my dreams...give to charity first, of course, then HELP my family with their mortgages, get a nice used

Six months after this whole journey began, I got a phone call from Mr. Thompson's office...THE WILL HAD BEEN LOCATED!!!

car, maybe one cruise and the liposuction will just have to be put on hold indefinitely.

I went about life as normal—work, church, and outings with family and friends. No one knew what was going on just under the surface...I had kept Project "Uncle Harley's Estate" close to the vest; any info about it was on a strict, need-to-know basis. Diane knew, of course, because she had been in the trenches with me, and I trusted her with my life—always have, always will. I had already decided that she would definitely be going on that cruise to Alaska with me. (*Oh, didn't I mention that earlier?*) I had gone ahead and booked the cruise, because it was less expensive if you got the tickets early. Uncle Harley would have been proud (I am such a bargain hunter!). I decided that even when I became a millionaire, I would continue to cut coupons, shop at discount stores, and use my Kroger card to save my ten cents on gas. I was determined to be the same *me* that I have always been, just a *more financially secure me*.

Six months after this whole journey began, I got a phone call from Mr. Thompson's office. Great news! THE WILL HAD BEEN LOCATED!!! It was in a safe deposit box in a small home-grown bank in St. Augustine, Florida. "It was several years old," Amanda said breathlessly over the phone, "And it's yellowed and wrinkled, but it's legal." The will would remain sealed, she told me, until they received it, notified the next of kin (me and my cousins) and filed it with the court. Amanda went on to say that it would take about a week to get all this done, so we scheduled a date and time to gather at Mr. Thompson's office for the reading of the will. She sounded so excited, she could barely contain herself. I sat down to catch my breath. I reminded myself that Uncle Harley could have still requested that his Estate be divided amongst us all. And that was okay. \$12.3 million, split three ways, after taxes was still nothing to sneeze at.

*No matter what, it*

*would be a win-win situation!*

My cousins called me to get the scoop. We decided that they would stay at my house the night before the will was to be opened and after the reading we would go to Ruth's Chris Steak House to—I don't know the right word here—*celebrate*? For the next few days I went to bed dreaming of all the new opportunities that this money would afford me—would afford all of us, really. Coroner Dave was right. Mr. Thompson was right. My life would never be the same.

Finally, the big day arrived—the reading of the will. The cousins and I gathered into Mr. Thompson's office, each one jockeying for position around the conference table, as if sitting closer to the attorney might translate into a bigger share of Uncle Harley's estate. *CRAZY*, huh? The atmosphere in the room was a weird combination of Mardi Gras merriment and Memorial Service somberness. The dichotomy of emotions played across all our faces. On one hand, the money would make such a big difference in our lives. But,



on the other hand, we realized this gift comes to us only through the death of an uncle who refused to let any of us close enough to really know or love him in his latter years; one who appeared to have postponed all his dreams until that elusive “someday” came along. Well, time ran out, leaving us, his distant relatives, as the beneficiaries of a life not lived, and dreams never fulfilled. So with emotions churning, we sat before the lawyer—merrily somber.

Mr. Thompson thanked us for our patience, while he searched through his files and proceeded to lay the official-looking documents out before him. I was truly dizzy with expectation—I had to remind myself how to breathe. *Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.* As he started to read, a wave of pride and love washed over me as I glanced around the table. My cousins and I have handled this whole matter with as much dignity and grace as we could muster...no fighting or backbiting. We were in it, all for one and one for all. Uncle Harley would have been so proud of us all. With a sense of peace and satisfaction that we can

handle anything the future holds, I zoned back in on Mr. Thompson and focused with laser-like concentration.

“So now that we have all of the formalities out of the way, I must inform all of you that Mr. Harley Shelnutt’s estate will not be divided in any way, but, as per his wishes, will go in total-ity to one beneficiary,” Mr. Thompson said soberly.

*I couldn’t believe my luck! After all, I was his favorite. It’s all mine!!! I tried so very hard not to glance at my cousins for fear that they would see the “Sorry, Suckas” look in my eyes!!! YES!!! YES!!! No, no, oh Lisa, try to be a good sport, please.* But visions of the Girls’ school in Africa with my name emblazoned across it and my beach house in the Hamptons flashed before my eyes once again! *Stop it, Lisa. Listen to the lawyer.* I attempted to gather my senses and rein in my inner child.

Taking a cleansing breath and offering up a silent thank-you to both God and Uncle Harley, I leaned forward in my seat with a grateful smile beginning to form on my lips and listened as Mr. Thompson carried on. “I, Harley Shelnutt, being of sound mind and

body do hereby bequeath my estate in its entirety to my life partner, Ray Fernández Pueblo.” Clipped to the will was a faded picture of a handsome young cabana boy with a hotel nametag that read, in broken sans serif letters, “Ray.”

*Re-calculate, re-calculate, re-calculate!!! Nein! Nein! Nein!!!*

After the reading, we said our polite goodbyes and I slumped off to the parking lot and crawled into my car. I then realized that a quick reassessment of the situation was in order. First, it appeared that Uncle Harley DID get out of that car on occasion. Perhaps that was an understatement. And above all, a twist on another old adage came to mind and seemed to fit to a tee: *Where there’s a will, there’s a Ray.*

The Ultimate Punk’d, indeed.

*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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**Forbidden Island**

by Tom Poland

AuthorHouse

*Forbidden Island, An Island Called Sapelo, tells the story of how an eccentric, self-made voodoo shaman—a white man—tries to save the last wild island off the SC/Georgia coast from developers. As well it's a story of how a writer who's weary of the city tries to save what's left of his family and help a woman find her missing daughter. In this excerpt, writer Slater Watts has just been saved from drowning by the reclusive voodoo high priest, Rikard Blackshear, aka "The Mullet Man." Rikard holds the answer to all the island's mysteries and possibly the missing daughter's whereabouts.*

# Forbidden Island

by Tom Poland

**M**y savior came back through the grass, cursing still. If he wasn't Rikard, he'd do until Rikard came along. He had blue eyes and straight hair gathered into a ponytail. His face had sharp features and a blonde-gray beard that seemed white from the sun.

A brilliant white sand dollar on a rawhide string dangled from his neck. He wore faded torn jeans, a white fisherman's cap, and a T-shirt. He was weathered and tan and could have been thirty, forty, or fifty.

I walked over to him, brushing clay-like muck off my hands.

"My name is Slater Watts."

"Rikard," he said, "Rikard Blackshear."

We shook hands, and I picked up the paddles I'd made.

"How in the hell did you know I was in trouble?"

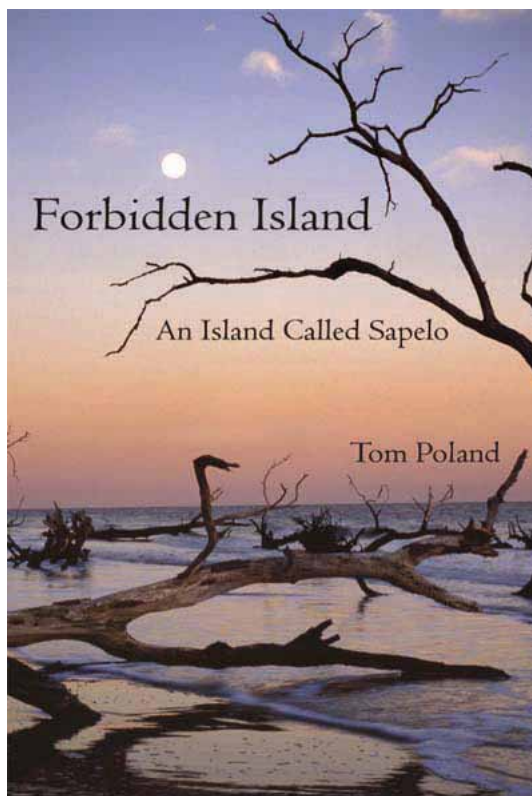
"I was cutting through the marsh west of here," he said, pointing, "and saw the old canoe floating off and knew somebody had messed with it. A canoe just don't free itself, you know. It's been stuck in this marsh for months. I was planning to get it myself and sell it. I don't have much use for canoes otherwise or the people who use them—en-viron-ment-alists, as a rule," he said, stretching out the syllables.

"Where in the hell did you come from? I didn't see you out there," I said pointing toward the sea, the only way in I knew of.

Rikard was coiling his rope in easy loops over his shoulder.

"I stay away from the big water. Don't need the trouble big water brings. The creeks—they're my high-way. I knew a way in here from back

there," he said pointing back over the hummock of grass I had stood on. "I couldn't get in here at low tide. We were in a death race. Lucky for you the rising tide let me in here just in time."



"Yes, lucky for me. I have a friend over there at the edge of the island. She's there somewhere. Can you take me to her?" I asked, pointing.

He shielded his eyes against the sun and turned toward the island.

"We can get only so close since the tide's not in good, but we can get close enough. She'll have to walk over to us at the point over there," he said sweeping his hand along the edge of the island.

"If you can help me get that canoe, it'd be a big help to me."

"The canoe? Well, it can't get far enough away. Let it ride."

It was an odd comment. I walked over the hummock with him, fighting my way through thick grass to a creek where an old beat-up bateau painted in marsh camouflage rocked in the wind.

"I'm gonna take you out into some water where you can jump in and get all that mud off. That okay?"

"Sure. No problem," and it wasn't, drowning, jellyfish or not. I hated having all that slime stuck on me.

We stopped and I jumped in, holding onto a short rope tied to the bateau. I allowed myself to sink as if the tide was claiming me but it had not and would not. I came up and went under once more then got into the bateau, which wasn't easy with the wet, heavy clothes weighting me down.

Rikard started a small Evinrude and we cruised down an alley of water where the grass grew high. We made a slow about-face and worked our way into the little creek where I had nearly drowned. He cut the engine and poled the boat over to where I had been sucked into the muck.

"All right, now," he said as he screwed a large hook into one end of the pole. He fished around with the pole, then thrust it into the right hole where I had



lost my shoe. He fished the pole around and came out with my shoe.

"That's pretty cool," I said. "Thanks."

"Believe me, you won't go far without shoes here. This island's got burrs and spurs that will go right through your feet."

He swirled my shoe in the brine until clean, removed the hook, and put it away. He turned the craft around and headed into the creek, taking forks to the left, and I saw where Tyler had stood. She was nowhere to be seen.

We beached the craft seventy yards from where she had stood and worked our way from low marsh to high marsh into a transition area and then up to maritime forest where walking was easier and eased down to the marsh where all my troubles had started. Then I saw Tyler coming through some trees. She saw us and began working her way toward us. We met on a slender spit of land jutting into a wide meandering creek.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're all right," she said. "I was going to swim out to free you but if I couldn't get you loose, I was going to give you this."

She handed me a hollow bamboo stalk seven feet long. It would have saved me, though spending six hours in all that dark water would have seemed like eternity.

"I thought it was over. Then this fellow came along."

I introduced her to Rikard.

Tyler put her business on the table.

"My name is Tyler Hill," she said, pulling the ever-present flyer from her blouse. "I'm here looking for my daughter, a young woman named Lorie. Do you recognize this woman?"

Rikard stared at the flyer, saying nothing. Then he repeated the name.

"Lorie ... that would be Lorie Hill?"

"That's right."

"No, I can't help you," he said returning the flyer to a crestfallen Tyler. "As far as I know, no white people live here at all."

"You live here," I said.

Rikard gave me a cold stare.

"Sure do, but I'm black or haven't

you noticed?"

Tyler looked at me and I looked at her. We were too stunned to say anything. Rikard turned and walked toward his bateau. We fell in behind him.

"If I've insulted you," I said, "it was purely unintentional. I'm not in the habit of insulting people who save my neck."

"You're not the first person to mistake me for a white man."

"Look, I wouldn't insult you. I need your help. If you could take me out to that canoe, I'd be most grateful. I'll paddle it in."

"Not in the wind and current. It'd take you all day," he said, "and you're gonna be one tired city slicker tonight. Not only did the marsh suck you in, it sucked your energy out too. You'll see. You're not going to have much muscle

Then Rikard, this Caucasian who claimed to be black, this "Mullet Man," did something I would take with me the rest of my life.

for that canoe, trust me on that."

"We sure need it," I said.

Rikard looked at the sun then across the marsh and pulled at his beard.

"Good thing I came along when I did or you'd be crab bait. Well, I've done my good deed for the day. I need to go."

"Hold on. I came here to find you and write a magazine article about you."

"A magazine article? On me?"

"Yes, you practice voodoo or so I hear."

"You don't know nothing about me," he said, and it was clear he was agitated.

"Just tell me where to find you. I'll write a story you'll like. I guarantee it."

"You guarantee it. Can you guarantee people will leave me alone after they read it? Can you guarantee that?"

"Maybe. We can keep your location a secret."

"Well, well. You just let me think about that for a while. As they say, don't call me. I'll call you. And if you mention me to others, they won't recognize 'Rikard.' They know me by my island name."

"What's that?"

"On this island, my island, people call me the Mullet Man."

"Mullet Man, all right, I've got it."

Then Rikard, this Caucasian who claimed to be black, this "Mullet Man," did something I would take with me the rest of my life. He walked to the water's edge and scanned the estuary from one horizon to the other. He checked the wind and the angle of the sun. He reached into his pocket and brought forth two smooth, white river rocks, then reached into a hip pocket and pulled out a short section of bamboo with holes cut into it.

He squatted over the water's edge and tapped the rocks in a rhythmic clicking-tapping code. Then he placed the flute into his mouth and whistled lilting tones that floated away at higher and higher pitches. He clicked the rocks and whistled for fifteen seconds more then quit. It sounded musical, a beautiful harmonic. Then he turned and tipped his cap to Tyler.

"I hope you find your daughter. She'd be a pretty woman by now... just like you, pretty lady. A woman like that could make a man happy, real happy."

He looked at me. "You be careful out here."

Voodoo stood on his back legs so Rikard could pet him and Rikard rubbed the spot between his eyes, then his ears, one at a time. The dog wanted to go with him, but Rikard whispered into Voodoo's ear and the dog trotted over by Tyler's legs and lay down.

And then Rikard, the Mullet Man, left through the woods to make his way to the bateau without so much as a glance back. As he disappeared into the marsh, I cursed him for not getting the canoe. It had almost killed me, had cost us most of the day, and we still didn't have the damn thing. I began dusting the dried muck from my clothes when Tyler spoke in reverence.

"My God, would you look at that."

Far out in the estuary, the canoe was coming at us. Its bow rising, it came across the estuary straight for us with surprising speed.

## Novel Excerpt

"I don't believe what I'm seeing," I said.

The canoe never slackened its pace, nor veered from its course. As it approached, we could see the dorsal fins of four porpoises, a pair up front and a pair in the back—on each side of the canoe—bringing it to us. The porpoises drove the canoe onto the point where we stood. Then each pair leaped from the water, dove, and raced away, clicking and whistling, surfacing and diving in incomparable choreography, paying homage to the fabled voodoo priest of Sapelo, Rikard Blackshear, the Mullet Man, the man who killed with his thoughts.

### Through the Heart

Nothing spurts adrenaline into your blood quite like a brush with death and witnessing a miracle. As soon as we returned to camp, I began making notes about my Baptism in the muck, which in truth had almost been my drowning, Mullet Man, alias Rikard, and the miracle of the porpoises. After almost five years, I had something genuine to write about, something no one else would have or could have but me. And that made all the difference.

When Cameron arrived, we could get photos of the porpoises performing another miracle. We would document a phenomenal event—a voodoo priest commanding animals—provided Rikard, this survivalist living in a land of no laws consented.

Sitting in my tent's screened alcove I went to work. Information, impressions, and observations flowed onto my legal pad. Like a shy girl, Tyler edged toward my tent, not so curious as to what I was writing as how. She had never met a writer and wanted to know how writers work. I explained how I write for I didn't care how other writers worked. My work involved making descriptions real, getting facts right, and style—involving readers by connecting them to the writing itself—a true art and the hardest part by far.

My murderous campmate's interest

was not feigned as bored, self-centered people do who feel compelled to ask about your work. English had been Tyler's favorite subject in high school and she had wanted to study English or Journalism, but her family could not afford college—they had no money.

After a series of odd jobs and a

We could see the dorsal fins of four porpoises, a pair up front and a pair in the back--on each side of the canoe--bringing it to us.

stint in a rainwear factory, she went to work for a florist and taught herself floral arrangement and did well, but she could never shake an American myth—the belief that college makes people better. The trial, which brought her lack of a degree to the surface, did nothing to destroy that belief. I told her college was among the most overrated aspects of American life. Hemingway had never set foot into a college, and it doubtless helped him. No meddling professors had ruined him. I loved the fact that Tyler had never gone to college. We were two shirts cut from the same cloth, each with a blue collar.

Tyler watched as I finished making notes. We had about five hours of daylight, so we decided to take the canoe up a large creek running north right off the channel and hone our paddling skills.

We loaded the canoe with water, Voodoo hopped in, and we put out into the channel. On either side of us, the island's blue creeks ran like veins, recycling nutrients into the great body of the planet.

We paddled like kids, hesitant and out of rhythm, but we were moving north into the interior where a rich abundance of bird life flourished. We drifted through marshlands where turquoise creeks snaked through emerald grasses and eased through this world eons from the city.

We floated through the fruitful estuary, through the heart of the island, where so much life begins. Magnitudes of waterfowl commanded attention, and Tyler, like a sentry, scanned the horizon

for telltale signs of pelicans. Any bird rising from the marsh caught her eye, but pelicans alone pulled Tyler from her seat. With each flight of pelicans, rising and gliding on their wide wingspans, she fell reverent, half stood, knees bent as if praying, hands steady on the gunwales, as quiet as the hour before dawn, placing her faith in the solitary bird that would lead her to Lorie.

Her dream flew on the wings of a solitary pelican, and I feared her dream would forever fly out of reach.

*Tom Poland's work has appeared in magazines throughout the South. He's published five books and more than 600 magazine features. His column, "Across The Savannah," appears weekly in the Lincoln Journal. The University of South Carolina Press has published three of his books, most recently, "Reflections of South Carolina." A Lincolnton, Georgia, native and University of Georgia graduate, he lives in Columbia, South Carolina.*

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# Dallas Frazier's Leap of Faith

by David Ray Skinner

**I**n 1952, when Oklahoma-born Dallas Frazier was twelve years old, he won a singing contest held by country music legend Ferlin Husky, and he began playing in the Bakersfield area. At age fourteen he started working on Cliffie Stones's *Hometown Jamboree* in Los Angeles and signed a recording contract with Capitol Records.

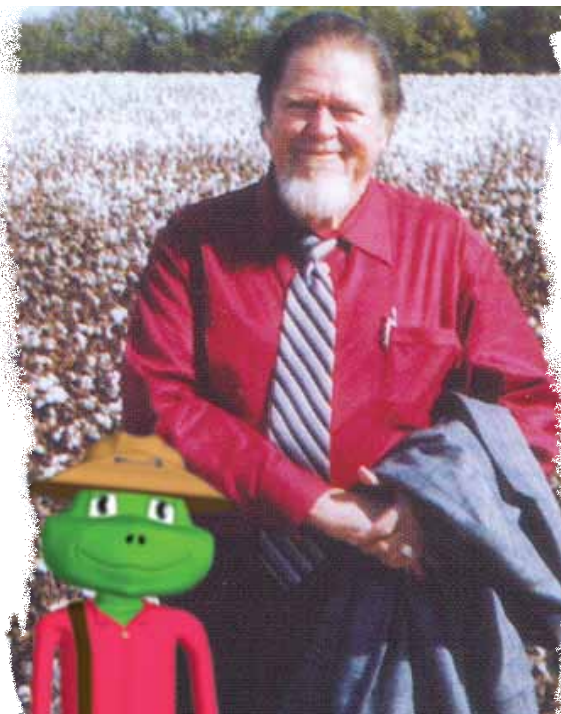
By then, Dallas had already begun perfecting his talent for songwriting; his first sessions included two self-penned compositions, "Ain't You Had No Bringin' Up a Tall" and "Love Life At Fourteen." Finally, in the summer of 1960, his passion for writing paid off, and Dallas struck gold. *The Hollywood Argyles* took his song about the time-traveling, club-carrying comic strip caveman, "Alley Oop" to number one, and every teen in the nation was singing, "Alley Oop-Oop, Oop, Oop-Oop."

The sixties found Dallas in Nashville, where he continued his string of hits, including Charlie Rich's "Mohair Sam," O.C. Smith's "Son of Hickory Holler's Tramp," and Jack Greene's 1967 Country Single (and Song) of the Year, "There Goes My Everything."

In the mid-sixties, Dallas teamed up with A.L. (Doodle) Owens and the hits continued. Brenda Lee's recording of "Johnny One Time" hit the charts, and in 1969, a Dallas and Doodle song, "All I Have to Offer You (Is Me)" was a huge success for Charlie Pride, accomplishing a feat that had not been achieved in twenty-five years—Pride became only the third African-American to have a Number One hit on the *Billboard* country chart. The previous one had been Nat King Cole in the early forties. The creative relationship between Doodle and Dallas spawned over 100 country chart singles during their reign together.

In the late sixties, the boundaries between country and rock began to blur as more of the traditional rock bands began to be influenced by Music

City and the Nashville Sound. Bands like *The Byrds*, *The Flying Burrito Brothers* and *Poco* had already been incorporating country elements in their albums and stage shows for sev-



eral years, and in early 1970, when *Poco* released its second album, it included Dallas's "The Honky Tonk Downstairs." It was the only song not written by the band, and its *tears-in-my-beers* flavor wasn't just sticking its toe into the Nashville Sound, it was doing a high-dive cannonball into it.

But, an even bigger success was waiting in the wings for Dallas and his music. In 1978, songwriter Rodney Crowell released his first solo album, "Ain't Livin' Long Like This," and side one kicked off with "Elvira," a song that Dallas had written in 1966. In

fact, that year, Dallas's original version of "Elvira" (from the LP of the same name) actually charted at #72 in the Hot 100 in the U.S. on the rock charts. Many (who had not seen Dallas's picture on the album cover) felt it was a R&B record by a black artist. The song even reached #27 in Canada.

Crowell's version picked up some modest airplay, but when the cover was heard and covered by *The Oak Ridge Boys*, it quickly climbed the Country charts to number one and went to #5 on the Billboard Hot 100 Pop Chart, its 2 million sales earning it platinum status.

The irony is that by then, Dallas had semi-retired from the music industry and was serving as a minister. From 1999 to mid-2006 he was the pastor of Grace Community Fellowship, a non-denominational church near White House, Tennessee.

Now, he's come full circle; he feels that God has more plans for his music, so, he's been back in the studio, writing and recording, just like the old days. The 12-song CD that has come out of the sessions is aptly titled "Dallas Frazier—Writing and Singing Again," and it picks up where he left off, all those years ago. Dallas has also created an animated project centered around a band of talented frogs called *"The Croak Masters."*

Fronted by Ralphie Bugsnackerson (pictured here with Dallas), the *Croak Masters* are determined to make a splash with Dallas's music (check them out on YouTube.com). Or, as Ralphie might say, "Who needs the blues when you gots the greens?"

Whether it's through his music or his ministry, from honkytonks to Heaven, Dallas Frazier is one Oklahoma boy who has stayed true to his roots and to his faith. What's more, all of us are richer for it.



## Next to Godliness

by Diane Kimbrell



hen I was growing up, I often dreamed of killing Othermama. In one dream, I boiled her head in a huge cauldron over an open flame. One could never please Othermama and she would often make hateful, insulting comments to those she loved the most.

Mama claimed she had the tongue of an Adder. But I loved her dearly—everyone did—in spite of her way with words. Othermama was my Mama’s Mama—my maternal grandmother. She’d lived with us for as far back as I could remember. I’m the youngest of four children—my Mama’s “baby girl.”

Othermama was the only one in our family who could think straight when the family got into trouble—like when we didn’t have any food in the house or couldn’t make the house payment, and in those days it seemed we were always in trouble. Othermama was

the only one who knew how to cook. Mama only used the stove to light a cigarette when she couldn’t find matches. Othermama wanted it that way. She was the head of our household—queen of the kitchen, and a devout Christian. We entered her kingdom at our own risk. Nobody could open the refrigerator without her asking, “Just what are you looking for?”

When I was fifteen, Mama had to sell the house we’d lived in for ten years due to financial problems. But we didn’t leave the small town of Quicksand, North Carolina; in fact,

we just moved a few miles down the road. As usual, Othermama saved the day. She heard about a house for sale from a friend and called the man who built it. She then talked the man into letting us rent it with the option to buy. It was a ranch-style house built from old bricks that was located at the end of a long bumpy dirt road near a lake. The house was brand new and looked fine from the outside, but on the inside nothing worked right. The cheapest building materials had been used, and even the switch plates on the walls weren’t screwed on straight. The place reminded me of the fun house at the county fair. At first glance, the ceilings seemed sturdy but we soon learned they were made out of a cardboard type material. Days after we moved in, a panel in the kitchen ceiling started to bulge—soon after, a small hole



## Short Story

appeared. The landlord said he'd send somebody to fix it but he didn't say when. I was sitting in the kitchen one night studying for a French test. The door was closed so the TV in the living room wouldn't bother me. Suddenly, although I was alone, I felt a presence. I looked around thinking maybe our dog Tuffy was lying under the table but she was nowhere in sight. I went back to conjugating verbs. Next I heard a noise that sounded like someone chewing on something. When I looked up, the chewing noises stopped. I figured it might be my imagination, after all, we did live out in the country. Nights were filled with mysterious noises. But a few minutes later, the chewing started again. It seemed to be coming from the damaged ceiling above the refrigerator. Then I thought I saw little pieces of something fall out of the hole in the ceiling. I quietly got up from my chair and tiptoed across the kitchen. The opening in the ceiling panel seemed quite a bit

larger than it had the day before. Without making a sound, I placed our step stool by the refrigerator and stood on it to get a better view. Our overhead kitchen light was dim. To save money, Mama rarely ever used more than 40-watt bulbs. Squinting into the semi-darkness to get a better look inside the hole, it took a minute to realize that two beady eyes were staring back at me. My screams brought everybody running.

It was common knowledge that field rats (and I assumed that's what the creature was) could be as big as small dogs. The next day the landlord plugged up the hole the rat had gnawed in the ceiling, but I never felt comfortable in that house again. However, I tried to make the best of it, because Othermama said we must rise above adversity. I wasn't exactly sure what adversity meant but I figured it had to do with Daddy. Daddy always had steady work but he drank and gambled away most of what he earned. On Saturdays, I would mop and wax the floors and polish our cheap modern

mortgaged furniture to a shine. To the naked eye, I suppose the place looked presentable.

The black-and-white kitchen floor tiles had been laid crooked, but that didn't bother me so much. It was the discolored tiles that nearly drove me mad. Some were so discolored (more yellow than white) the floor never looked clean. That's what led me to use Texize that day. I had no intention of killing Othermama. I just wanted the floor to look nice. My girlfriends, Nancy and Jill were coming to visit. I rarely had friends over. For one thing, I had very few friends, and for another, I was always afraid that Daddy would drive up drunk and make a scene. Not that he would be ugly to my friends, au contraire, he would flirt with them, I'm sure. Such a scene was too hor-

I had no intention of killing Othermama. I just wanted the floor to look nice. My girlfriends, Nancy and Jill were coming to visit.

rifying for me to risk. Rather than suffer humiliation, I kept to myself most of the time. When I wasn't doing my homework or watching TV, I would go to my bedroom and listen to rock & roll on the radio and dance—do the shag with my partner, the bedpost. I would pretend that I was at a sock hop at school dancing with Ward Laney, President of the Student Body. Ward was a champion shagger and the best-looking boy at school.

Texize, a milky-white, all-purpose cleaner, had a fresh outdoor smell that I liked. We used it on the floors and the bathroom fixtures. Most of the time we diluted it with water because full-strength—it was way too strong. I had already mopped the kitchen floor once that day, but some of the tiles appeared to be dingier than ever, so I decided to mop it again. I had no idea that it was my own shame I was attempting to scrub away. And, I wouldn't learn until years later that shame could never be removed—only managed.

This time, instead of mixing the Texize in the bucket of water, I decided

to pour some into a smaller container. I found an old purple-flowered jelly glass under the kitchen sink, poured about ¼ cup of Texize into the glass then added water. It occurred to me that it looked like a glass of milk, but at the time, I thought no more about it because it sure didn't smell like milk. Even though it was diluted, one whiff burned my nostrils, making them feel down right raw.

I poured a small amount of the Texize on the middle section of the kitchen floor then took the mop to it. Maybe this was just what was needed. More Texize. More muscle. The tiles began to appear a little brighter. I was about to pour more on the next section when Mama called me to the phone. It was my friend Nancy confirming directions to our house. Just as I was about to leave the kitchen, Othermama came in through the back door.

"Careful," I warned, "floor's wet. That's Texize in the glass. Leave it on the table. I'll be right back." Othermama

had a habit of coming behind you and undoing whatever you'd done. Like, if I hadn't told her to leave the glass alone, she would've probably poured the contents out. That was just Othermama's way. She always wanted everything in its place. I knew she thought I was crazy for mopping the floor again. She contended that people would like me for myself—not for the clothes I wore or the house I lived in. She also insisted that people wouldn't judge me by my Daddy's drunken behavior. I desperately wanted to believe her. But deep down, I feared that our floor would never be clean enough for company to walk on, I would never be good enough to have friends, and worse yet, I feared I was doomed to dance with a bedpost for the rest of my life.

I returned to the kitchen, picked up the mop, poured the diluted Texize on the floor and set out to finish the job. Othermama had a meatloaf baking in the oven. As cooks go, she was the best. "Sure smells good," I said. Othermama ate up compliments. When she didn't say thank you, I glanced up

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from the mop I was guiding across the floor to see her standing by the kitchen table—her pretty features twisted in a pained expression. In one hand, she held the jelly glass with the purple flowers—with her other hand she clutched her throat. Othermama was of Scotch-Irish decent. Her short white wispy hair had once been the color of chestnuts, and they said she'd had a fine figure. Now, at age 72, she had a figure like the Pillsbury Doughboy.

"Damn if I must say it!" she gasped. Othermama never cursed or used the Lord's name in vain.

"Othermama," I said, "what did you do? Oh no, oh, no. You didn't! Mama! Come quick!" I screamed. "Othermama drank Texize." If she died it would be my fault. I pulled out a chair for Othermama and she sank down at the table.

"Why did you do that?" I asked, fighting back tears.

"I thought it was milk," she said with a short cough.

"I told you it was Texize."

"Guess I didn't hear you," Othermama said.

"I'll get her something to make her vomit," Mama offered. Mama seemed calm for some reason. She was always the one who fell to pieces when somebody got hurt. The sight of blood made her feel faint.

"What about a raw egg?" I asked.

"That won't do it," Mama said, and I remembered she was right. Othermama loved raw eggs. Sometimes she drank them in orange juice. The very thought of eating a raw egg in anything made me gag. I felt helpless and weak all over. "I'm sorry, Othermama. I didn't mean for you to get hurt. I only meant to clean..."

"Oh hush," she said, pushing herself away from the table.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"To the bathroom." Her voice seemed higher pitched and more quivery than usual. Was the stuff eating away her vocal chords?

Mama was still looking in the refrigerator for something to make

Othermama throw up when it occurred to me to call the drugstore. The drug-gist, Mr. Dinwitty would know what to do. He was a kind man—smoked a pipe—looked like a professor.

"Quicksand Drugs, Dinwitty speaking."

"Sir, Mr. Dinwitty, this is Niki Bradshaw."

"Yes?"

"We have an emergency."

"Yes?"

"Othermama—my grandmother just drank some Texize and we don't—we don't know what to do."

"How much did she drink?"

"One or maybe two big swigs," I said.

"It was an accident." "O.K., calm down, Niki. Was it full strength?"

**According to Plato, Socrates drank Hemlock and died peacefully. First his feet went numb, then his legs.**

"No sir. I added water."

"Good. Would you say there was more water than Texize in the glass?"

"Oh, yes sir. Lots more"

"Twice as much?"

"Uh, yeah. I think so, sir."

"Where was the glass of Texize?" he asked. I took a deep breath. "On the kitchen table," I said. "I can explain, sir. She loves to eat and sometimes—rather than waste food, she'll eat what's left on a plate or drink what's left in a glass. It's not a good habit and we've told her. This time she decided to finish what she thought was a glass of—"

"Go get the bottle of Texize and read the label to me. I'll wait," Mr. Dinwitty said. I could hear terrible retching sounds and over them, Mama's sweet, patient voice coming from the bathroom.

According to Plato, Socrates drank Hemlock and died peacefully. First his feet went numb, then his legs. When the poison hit his heart...If Othermama died, I would have to die, too. I couldn't live without her. Nor could I live with my guilt so sitting for years on death row waiting to be fried in the electric chair wasn't an option. Like Mama, I feared the sight

of blood so cutting my wrists was out of the question. The law of retribution required "an eye for an eye." I would hold my nose and drink what was left in the bottle of Texize—full strength. Given the circumstances, it was the only decent thing to do. I began reading.

"Slow down," Mr. Dinwitty said. I could hear him puffing on his pipe. My throat felt dry but I began again and attempted to pronounce each word clearly. Othermama's life depended on it.

"Texize. Pine Oil disinfectant. Banishes bad odors."

"Just the ingredients, please."

"Yes sir. Wait a minute." I was so frightened it was hard to focus my eyes. "Harmful if swallowed. No. No. I'm sorry. Here it is. Active ingredients: Steamed distilled pine oil 80%. Vegetable soap 10%. Inert ingredients—"

"That's fine, Niki."

"Will she be OK, Mr. Dinwitty?"

"Pinus palustris," he said.

"Huh?" He began to spell it out. After the 'p-i-n-u-s,' I stopped listening. Was he talking dirty? My face grew hot. "I beg your pardon?"

"Pinus palustris, my dear. The common name of the longleaf pine. Longleaf pine is the state tree of North Carolina"

"Oh," I said.

"Has she regurgitated?" he asked.

"Yes, I believe so."

"Good. Have her eat bread. I don't believe she drank enough to worry about or to have her stomach pumped. I think she'll be fine."

"Oh, thank God. Are you sure" I asked.

"Here's to the land of the long leaf pine," he began, "The summer land where the sun doth shine, Where the weak grow strong and the strong grow great, Here's to "Down Home," the Old North State!" That's our state toast," Mr. Dinwitty explained. "And yes, Niki, I'm sure. Your grandmother will be fine."

"O.K." Thanks again." I waited to hear him hang up before I placed the



## Short Story

receiver back on its hook. My face still felt warm.

"What did he say?" Mama asked. Othermama, looking pale and somewhat shaken followed her into the kitchen. I thought it best not to tell them about the toast to the Pinus thing so I said, "He wanted to know if she had vomited and I said I thought so."

"I did." Othermama said, sitting down at the table again. This time I sat down beside her. I gently placed my hand on her fleshy arm. Her skin felt cool, clammy.

"He said he doesn't think you drank enough to have your stomach pumped. You should be fine. He said to eat bread."

"I'll get it," Mama said.

"Just a couple slices," Othermama said. As she ate, Mama and I exchanged glances for the first time. I knew what she was thinking and she was right. My actions were careless. Regardless

of Othermama's bad habits, I had to be more careful.

"Niki," Othermama said between bites, "tell me. Why in the name of goodness did you put Texize in a drinking glass?"

"Well, I wanted to use a smaller container. I found the glass under the sink and figured you used it for cleaning. Why did you drink out of it?"

"It looked like milk."

"But Othermama, how can you drink from someone else's glass? That's disgust—"

"Let's settle down," Mama said. "Niki, your girlfriends should be here any minute." She turned to Othermama. "How do you feel?"

"Thirsty. I think I'd like a glass of milk." Mama and I both burst out laughing. Othermama joined in. Color slowly began returning to her face. The crunch of tires on the gravel in the driveway signaled the arrival of

Nancy and Jill. I kissed Othermama on the cheek and went to greet them at the front door. Maybe Othermama was right. So what if the walls of our house were made of beaverboard and the kitchen ceiling with the ugly patch job still sagged. I did the best I could do with what I had. My beloved Othermama was alive—that's all that really mattered at that moment. I opened the front door eager to greet my friends.

*Actress and writer Diane Kimbrell has lived in NYC for many years, but was born and raised in Charlotte, North Carolina. Her literary credits include The Raleigh Review, The Battered Suitcase, the Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, Subtletea, Muscadine Lines, the SFWP Journal, River Walk Journal, and "Dew on the Kudzu."*



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# Chickadee

by Bettye H. Galloway



“What kinda chickadee you got out there in the bushes?” asked the carpenter who was building a deck on my house.

“Chickadee?” I asked. “I don’t have anything living out there.”

“Yep, you do,” he responded, “I been seeing him for a couple of days! He’s bright red and must be scared of me, ’cause he hides when I’m around, but I’ve seen him several times.”

I thought no more about the conversation, but several days after the carpenter left I was in the backyard when I saw a glimpse of red. I remembered what had been said, and I sat quietly in the deck chair and watched. Soon I saw a patch of red and green feathers slowly exit the bushes and start scratching in the grass at the edge of the wooded area.

When I moved, he quickly eased back out of sight. I looked in my pantry and found a package of un-popped popcorn. I filled a bowl with water and took it with the popcorn to the general vicinity where I had seen the fowl. Placing them on the grass, I softly called, “Here, Chickadee, here Chickadee,” and went back into the house. I watched through the window until I saw him gingerly ease out to the corn and water. He was a beautiful gamecock and became “Chickadee,” the name the carpenter had first given him.

I left the corn and water each day, and in a few days he would appear even when I was sitting outside on the deck. As time passed, he would appear as I waited quietly with the food. He would bravely get closer and closer to me, and one day he accidentally brushed my ankle. The next day he actually came to my ankle, and from then on every time I walked in the yard, Chickadee walked beside me brushing against my ankle.

Chickadee was a beautiful bird—he arrived at my house from God knows where—with red and green and black feathers that glistened like they were freshly oiled. He lived in my

backyard and patrolled the perimeters constantly. When I opened the door to go to the mailbox, the security chime would alert him, and he would sail around the house to walk with me to the street, and then he would return to the backyard. When I left for work in the mornings, he was on the crest of the roof, Dog Patch style, watching as I backed out of the driveway.



Since owning a rooster was illegal in the city, I was afraid one of my neighbors would report him to the Health Department, but they all seemed to enjoy his low-key crowing every morning from his perch in the magnolia tree.

He made friends with his neighbor, Annie, a huge black fuzzy dog who was always within her fenced back yard. They would “talk” through the fence, and Chickadee would crawl through the fence and share Annie’s food. One day I saw in the yard a blue fuzzy bear that I knew was Annie’s toy. I was puzzled because Annie never came into my yard. I picked up the toy and tossed it over the fence. The next day, I again saw Annie’s blue bear in my yard. Puzzled more than ever, I once again tossed it over the fence. The next day I looked out and couldn’t

believe my eyes—Chickadee was coming through the fence pulling Annie’s toy! Chickadee was gorgeous, but he was a thief!

Our town offers a welcome service—citizens can rake leaves to the curb, and the city workers come by with a gigantic vacuum cleaner and suck up the leaves and trash—no bagging. Consequently, I would rake leaves onto an old sheet, drag it across the yard, and empty it at the curb. Chickadee, at my ankle as usual, would watch every move I made. After several trips with the sheet, as I started to the curb to empty it again, he hopped upon it; the movement, however, caused him to fall off. The next time I pulled the loaded sheet toward the curb, he once again hopped upon it. I moved it very slowly until he got his sea legs, and he rode it all the way to the curb. From that time on, he was a regular passenger on the sheet. I was unable to get a photo of him on the sheet because the moment I stopped pulling it, he hopped off.

Chickadee was a grand friend over the course of several years. He never made demands and only expected his daily popcorn and water. His constant presence against my ankle told me that I was loved and the love was mutual. He would look at me with twinkling eyes, and if birds could smile, he did. He would never occupy any of the birdhouses or cages I bought for him, always preferring the limb on the magnolia tree that overlooked a transom window. He would sit on his limb, watching through the window as I worked on my computer in the den. He was always there.

He was always there until the day I came home to find only a pile of feathers under the magnolia tree and a trail of feathers across the yard. It was a lucky day for the chicken hawk. I hope he enjoyed Chickadee as much as I did. I have lost many human friends and relatives, but I did not cry for them. I cried when I lost Chickadee.



# Blue Tick Hound

by Kelly L . Frey, Sr.

*my old friend returns  
tired from a day in the field  
drawn to the hearth  
by some vague recollection of warmth  
only to find the chill  
of October stone  
and waits,  
patiently,  
for me to rekindle the fire*





# The 'Almost Last' Mission

Story by Lt. Col. Jasper D. Skinner

Edited by Jann Skinner Marthaler

**T**hree navigators?" Jerry glanced up from his check-off sheet and eyed the approaching trio with obvious disdain. "Who needs three navigators?"

"Headquarters must not think too much of your piloting, Commander. Sending Cerberus to keep an eye on ya." My co-pilot, Tom Anderson, grinned at me and vaulted out of the hatch, landing with an ungraceful thud that sent echoes throughout the cavernous hanger. "Maybe you better let me handle 'er tonight."

Actually, I was quite impressed by Tom's knowledge of ancient Greek and Roman Mythology...mentioning Cerberus, the three-headed hound that guards the gates of the underworld. Not so sure how the three navigators

would feel about that, though. Also, not impressed enough to hand over the controls.

"Or maybe it's Paul they don't trust." Now Jerry Manchel, our radio operator, was the one grinning. He raised his voice as the three airmen approached, "Need to send two watchdogs to keep an eye on you, eh Pauley?" Paul Schoeffler, our crew navigator was one of the three that had drawn the short straw for this mission.

"That'll be enough, Sergeant," I barked back at Jerry. "Back to your station, if you please, and finish your

sheet. I'd like to get airborne before sunset." *And hopefully before those clouds form up*, I added silently. As the crew returned to their duties, I examined the approaching storm. An ominous darkness was spreading out overhead, covering the entire horizon; flashes of lightning could be seen discharging deep within the dark blue mass. "Not good," I muttered. "Not good at all."

As World War II was winding down in the Western Pacific, our crew, "Jasper's Jokers," found ourselves on the tiny isle of Ie Shima. Our 90<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group, a B-24 Liberator outfit nicknamed the "Jolly Rogers," was one of several Bomb Groups of the 5<sup>th</sup> Air Force being readied for the



final assault on the Japanese Empire homeland. Besides Tom, Jerry, Paul and me, there were six other members of “Jasper’s Jokers” along for that ride...Ken Meier, the engineer, Elmer Schwane, our bombardier, James West, the top-gunner, Frank Baur, the armorer/gunner, Robert Arraj, our nose gunner, and Horace Skinner, the tailgunner (no relation to me, but to keep us straight, he was referred to as “Little Skinner,” which left me with the moniker, “Big Skinner”).

We had been ordered to fly an armed reconnaissance mission along a weather frontal system from Okinawa, northward to the Tokyo Bay area, in preparation for the massive raid against Japan. Although two atomic bombs had already been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Group Brass remained uncertain as to the disposition of the Empire’s rulers. They designed one last overpowering strike in the hopes that this would force the Emperor to realize that immediate surrender was the only viable option left. Our crew was to report back with weather sightings and any other pertinent information that would assist our bombers in carrying out this final assault on the Japanese mainland. As usual, pilots, engineer, radio operator, gunners and navigators (Group, Squadron and Crew navigators) all received separate briefings by a staff member of their specialty, prior to embarking.

As soon as “Mary-Ellen” (the name tattooed on the side of our reconnaissance plane) had been verified a-okay and ready to fly, we strapped in and prepared for take-off. The huge B-24 roared to life, taxied down the runway and became airborne just after 18:30 hours, as the last of the sun’s rays were swallowed up by the now omnipresent storm clouds. Almost immediately, the plane started to buck in the powerful winds bearing down on us from all sides, increasing in strength the higher we climbed. I shouted through the intercom for all hands to secure their stations, and cinched my own restraints up a notch—this was going

to be a bumpy ride. Our plane, all nineteen tons of her, was tossed about as if she were a paper toy while violent up and down drafts called for some quick power and piloting adjustments to keep us from being torn apart. To make matters worse, giant raindrops began to splatter against the windscreen, beating a constant rhythm that could be heard throughout the hold. Normally, this would have prevented any visual navigation, except for the fact that the dense cloud cover had already erased the outside world from view. We were engulfed in a pitch-black void, broken only by the incessant bursts of cloud-to-cloud lightning shooting across the sky. *Thank God for radar*, I thought. *Without it, we’d be flying blind.*

“Commander? Sir? You better come take a look at this.” A worried-looking Jerry popped his head through the cockpit door and motioned me back

I watched in horror as the entire left wing began to glow eerily...

to the hold. “I think we may be in trouble.”

*Great. Now what?* “Take over, Tom.” As I struggled to get free of my restraints and keep my balance at the same time, the Lieutenant took over control of the ship from the copilot’s seat. “I’ll be back in a minute. Coming, Jerry.”

Somehow we both managed to get back to the hold without having our heads bashed in from the ongoing turbulence. “Look at this,” the Sergeant’s voice was as close to a whisper that he could get and still be heard above all the weather. Sitting down at his radio station overlooking the right wing, he held up a pencil about three inches from where the copper antenna lead-in wire entered the ship from the outside. A white-hot electrical spark instantly appeared between the two objects. “If we don’t get out of this storm, but quick, all of our equipment is going to fry.”

I watched the flickering light arch

back and forth across the small gap, a sense of unease beginning to slowly creep down my spine. “Shut it down. Now. Along with every other piece of non-essential gear. We don’t need to risk...”

“COMMANDER!”

Paul was staring wild-eyed out one of the hull windows. “Commander! Look!!”

Racing to his side, I peered out into the inky blackness. I could see nothing except the flash of lightning encircling the ship. “What is it, Lieutenant? I don’t...”

“There!!”

And then I saw—and understood. I watched in horror as the entire left wing began to glow eerily; the light growing in intensity until...*FLASH...* A giant ball of electricity appeared and started a deadly dance along the edges of the wing, traveling up and over the outside skin of the ship, antenna wires

and rudders, until it ran its course and discharged into the atmosphere. It only lasted an instant, but was then immediately replaced by another build-up, and another wraith-like sphere crawling its way over our plane. The propeller blades

would build up a brilliant glow just prior to each lightning bolt discharge.

“Oh dear God,” I breathed. “St. Elmo’s Fire.”

Tearing myself away from the incredible sight, I staggered back up to the cockpit and reclaimed control of the ship. The Sergeant was correct; we had to get out of here now. While the amazing light show taking place on top of us was not lethal in and of itself, the path that the “Fire” followed repeatedly took it over the length of both the wings—which stored the 100-octane aviation gas that powered the ship’s four engines. If a spark somehow managed to breach the containers located within, the explosion would rip the plane apart. We had to get above this storm.

Before I could toggle on my throat mic and announce my intentions to the crew, Jerry once again called up through the hatch. “Commander,” his voice cracked, “Commander, Sergeant regrets to inform you that the radar

## Wartime Memoir

set..." He paused, took a breath and continued, "The radar set has burned out."

"Burned out?" I fought to control the rage boiling up inside me. "HOW did it BURN OUT?!" The Sergeant started to offer an explanation about the sparks shorting out the equipment, but I quickly cut him off. "Never mind! Get back to your position." My thumb flipped on the mic switch. "Attention all crew. Secure yourselves and your stations. We're going up and out of this mess."

Once all hands reported back secure, we started our torturous ascent. It took a few gut-wrenching minutes during which our Mary-ellen felt like a shuttlecock in some giant's game of badminton, but eventually we succeeded in breaking out into a brilliantly moonlit sky.

*Beautiful. Now to get this old bird turned around and headed back to base.* "Take over again, Tom. I'm going back to plot a course back to base."

"Good idea, Sir." The grin was back. "Make the Three Musketeers earn their fare."

Laughing as I once more unbuckled myself, I traveled back to the hull. Paul and the two other navigators were huddled around a table, talking quietly.

"Hey guys," I called out, "Work time. Grab your charts and let's see if we can't make it back at least for breakfast." The conversation stopped, but nobody moved.

"Preferably before sunrise, Paul."

Still, nobody made any indication of complying with my request.

"Lieutenant! That was an order! Move it!!"

Paul slowly stood up and walked towards me. As he approached, I saw that his face had turned a ghostly pale, and the look in his eyes sent a shiver

down my spine. "Paul? What's wrong?"

"Sir. It would appear..." Pausing, he glanced back at the table, licked his lips and started again. "Sir. The Lieutenant cannot carry out the order. The Lieutenant does not have his star charts on his person."

"Well then, use one of theirs." I gestured vaguely towards the two other navigators, who then shrunk down in their seats, like they wanted to make themselves invisible. *Oh no.* The dread was back. "Lieutenant?"

Paul slowly shook his head.

*You've got to be kidding.* "Please tell me you're joking." Again, he shook his

wrong, I ordered him to take up a dead reckoning heading to try and bring us to a landfall over Japan. *Anywhere* in Japan. At first he did not follow, but then comprehension of the situation took over and he slowly brought the great ship around, following the line of the compass to what we hoped would lead us to a usable landing place.

A silence as thick and heavy as a wet blanket engulfed the ship. Even Mary-ellen seemed to muffle the hum of her propellers in tune with our terrible crisis. Seven hours into our mission, just after 01:30 hours, we sighted the snow-covered cone of Mt. Fujiyama, the sacred mountain of Japan. It stood there, silent and alone above

a solid undercast of fleecy white clouds.

I called back and asked the navigators to try and give us a heading from Mt. Fuji back to our base on Ie Shima, and with a little germ of hope starting to grow, swung the plane around to begin the homeward leg.

Tom and I had often practiced emergency fuel economy measures on previous long, over the water missions—now we began again in earnest. Following the example of Charles

Lindbergh in the South Pacific, we adjusted our speed and manifold pressure, and set extremely lean fuel/air mixtures that buried the needles of the safety and temperature gauges in the red. This technique proved successful in the past in expanding P-38 Fighters' range, so we hoped it would follow suit and be enough to get us back to base safely. Fuel was a growing concern. Our mission was to have lasted only four hours. We had nearly doubled that already, and still had to cover the distance back. I knew we could make it, but it was going to be tight. *Or could we?*

The dreary night gradually turned



head negative. Numbness hit my legs, forcing me to lean up against the cold bulkhead for support. "None of you? NONE OF YOU brought your Star Tables?" Apparently each of them believed that one of the other two navigators would have his set of tables available for use, and had not bothered to double-check before we took off.

We were now officially lost. No radar, no celestial navigation possible, no way to determine our position, and flying over enemy territory, which, of course, ruled out radioing anyone.

"God help us."

Hand over hand, I staggered back up to the pilot's seat and sunk into the chair. Before Tom could ask what was

to dawn, and then to full daylight. The vast and empty North Pacific looked more gray than blue as we slowly made our way back home, and the whitecaps of foam topping off the massive waves below us were clearly visible. The good news was that the violent storms of the previous night had rapidly swept away to the east. However, this left a powerful headwind to confront us on our return, forcing the increased consumption of precious fuel in the attempt to merely maintain our present altitude. Since we did not have positive knowledge of our position, as we lacked both wind speed and direction components, I instructed Jerry to break radio silence and attempt to contact our base. Precise direction was now needed to guide us to safe harbor. It was a long three-quarters of an hour before we received any response, but at last the heading came through. I adjusted our course accordingly, and offered up a silent prayer, asking that we would still possess enough fuel to reach Ie Shima.

Our conservation measures called for us to disregard the normal operation routine, and therefore resulted in a gradual descent. To offset the altitude loss and to extend our range as much as possible, I instructed the gunners Horace, Elmer, James, Frank and Robert, to throw overboard all the machine guns, boxes of ammunition, and anything and everything that was not bolted down.

"Does that include extra deadbeat navigators?" Jerry smiled sweetly over at the trio.

"No," I replied, suppressing my true feelings. "At least, not yet."

A few minutes later, Kenny Meier, our flight engineer came forward, his face looking as ashen as Paul's had last night.

"Sir? Sergeant Meier reporting, Sir. Upon checking our tanks, I estimate that with our present weight and speed, we have approximately one-half hour's fuel supply remaining, at best."

"Right. Thank you, Sergeant." Dismissed, Meier retreated back to the hold. *Well, this is it.* I flipped my

mic on. "Attention all crew. Find your ditching positions. Repeat. All crew, man your ditching positions." *Put your head between your legs*, I thought, turning the mic back off.

"Ditch? In this beast?" Tom sounded incredulous. "We'll never survive. Mary-Ellen's a great gal, don't get me wrong, but B-24s don't ditch. They belly-flop and explode. I mean... Commander? Hey, are you listening to me?"

"Cliffs," I whispered. "Limestone cliffs."

"...please don't crack up on me now, Sir." The Lieutenant was almost pleading. "If we're going to ditch this thing, you're going to have to help. I don't think I can handle..."

"We're not going to ditch, Tom. Look!" Nodding towards the window, I directed my co-pilot's attention to the horizon line, where a thin sliver of white rock grew larger and larger as

pairs of eyes watched expectantly as the last remaining source of our ship's power coughed, sputtered, and finally faded into silence.

Jerry shook his head in disbelief. "And all this drama for nothing."

I turned towards the radio operator, "What do you mean, 'for nothing'?"

"Talked to base right after we touched down. Japan has surrendered. They're gonna be bringin' the peace envoys right through here in less than a week. Should be quite a sight."

"Oh," I replied quietly, and left it at that. There was no need to say anything more.

Once we had disembarked, I did a mental disaster checklist...it's not everyday that you have death thrown at you five different ways. Let's see, first there was the storm. The wind and turbulence alone were enough to take us down. Secondly, the plane becoming engulfed in St. Elmo's Fire, with the constant thought and fear of explosion. Then, the navigation radio going out, which left us in the hands of the three navigators, all of whom had left their navigation charts back at base.

Those were disasters numbers three and four, which could have caused us to be permanently lost over the vast Pacific, *and* in enemy territory. Fifth, and finally, the fact that we were flying for 15 hours and 45 minutes on fuel supplies that were designed to last much less time...yes, you bet I was giving thanks, as was the rest of the crew.

*This true story was written several years ago by Lt. Col. Jasper D. Skinner, who passed away this past January. The story was edited by Jann Skinner Marthaler, the daughter of Horace Skinner (Little Skinner), who passed away in December of 1997. He had served as Jasper's Jokers' tail gunner in the latter days of the war in the South Pacific theater. They were Combat Crew #379. The Combat Crew before them (#378) and after them (#380) did not survive the war.*

"Ditch? In this beast?"  
Tom sounded incredulous.  
"We'll never survive..."

we approached. Ie Shima, at last! The old rock never looked so good!

Tom whooped out a victory cry as I contacted the tower for permission to land. When we touched down, the squeal of the tires hitting tarmac was like an angel's chorus singing us into paradise. We were all laughing, or crying, or both—just very happy to be home safe and sound. But the festive atmosphere lasted only a moment, as the reality of how close we came to death was driven home, with *force*. Less than half the way down the runway, number three engine ran completely out of gas and powered down. Number four engine shortly followed.

"Eh, two out of four isn't bad," grinned Jerry, who joined us in the cabin the moment we started to taxi back to base.

"Oh yeah? Well how about one?" Tom pointed out the window where engine number one was now silent. It too had run out of fuel. Turning towards the number two engine, three





# The Spirits of Cascade Hollow

By Thomas Hall

**T**he day was glorious. The sky was clear, the temperature mild. I had money in my pocket, time on my hands and I was lost in central Tennessee. “The Chickamauga battlefield?” said the nice lady behind the counter, “That’s a long ways off. Wouldn’t you rather tour our distillery?”

I often make interesting discoveries while lost, but this one was special. I had wandered into Cascade Hollow, home of George Dickel’s Tennessee whisky.

The history of whisky in America is long and colorful. In the first years of the nation, corn whisky was easier to transport, and more profitable, than corn itself, which made it a central part of the frontier economy. In 1791, when the “East Coast Establishment” imposed an excise tax on whisky, the

Whisky Rebellion erupted. President Washington was eventually compelled to raise a militia of over 12,000 troops (larger than the army that fought the Revolution), placing it under the command of Revolutionary War hero “Lighthorse” Henry Lee. (You have probably heard of General Lee’s son, one Robert E. Lee.) The episode is somewhat ironic; at one time, George Washington was the largest distiller in the Colonies. In the 20th Century, Prohibition created a new industry—the

traffic in illegal spirits. My late father-in-law allegedly ran bootleg Canadian whisky from Detroit to Chicago for a fellow named Capone. (Whisky trivia—Scotch is made from malted barley; Bourbon and Tennessee whisky are made mainly from corn; and Canadian whisky is based on malted rye.)

The history of George Dickel reflects America’s history. The distillery was founded in 1870, to produce “Cascade Tennessee Whiskey.” Mr. Dickel, a successful Nashville businessman, purchased the operation in 1884 and ran it until he retired in 1888. In post-Civil War Tennessee, whisky was again easier to transport, and more profitable than corn itself. In 1910, the State of Tennessee went dry, and operations moved to Kentucky. When Prohibition

was imposed nationwide, operations ceased. The Dickel family sold off the trademarks during this time. In 1958 the distillery in Cascade Hollow was rebuilt and bottling of George Dickel Tennessee Whisky, based on Mr. Dickel's original recipes, began in 1964, to the delight of drinkers around the Universe. (We'll get to that shortly.)

That time lag—from 1958 to 1964—illustrates one of the challenges of starting a distillery. Years may pass before the product is ready for market. That lag also distinguishes “whisky” from “moonshine.” Commercial whisky is aged in oak barrels for three years or more. The tannins and sugars in the wooden barrels give the whisky its color, character and “smooths” the drink. The longer the whisky ages, the more complex it becomes, and the more expensive. That 21-year-old bottle of spirit represents a very long term investment by its maker. The aging process can also be responsible for occasional shortages. If demand increases unexpectedly, there is no way to increase the production immediately. Each barrel ages at its own pace.

Producing grain alcohol is relatively simple; allow a solution of water, grain and yeast to ferment. Boil the solution to drive off the alcohol. (Alcohol boils at a lower temperature than water, so it will evaporate first.) Capture the alcohol vapor in copper pipes and cool it so it returns to liquid state. You should now have a clear liquid consisting mostly of grain alcohol. You can add it to gasoline to create ethanol or drink it, if you are daring. Based on the one or two times I've sampled raw spirit, I'd say you can also use it to remove rust or strip paint. Turning that spirit into a beguiling whisky is part art, part science. Which may explain why John Lunn, Dickel's master distiller, served a lengthy apprenticeship after obtaining a degree in chemistry.

The grain—corn, barley and rye—is why Dickel differs from Scotch, which is made primarily from malted barley. It was surprising to learn that the rye comes from my home state of Wisconsin. The types of grains used, their precise sources, and the amount

of each is a carefully-guarded secret. Another secret is the strain of yeast. The yeast is so important that backup samples are kept in secure, off-site locations. As for the water, it comes from a local spring renowned for its purity. Indeed, the distillery was located in Cascade Hollow to take advantage of this remarkable water.

But the water is not the only remarkable feature of Cascade Hollow; it is rivaled by the distillery tour. When the clock ticked around to my time, I was the only visitor present. My guide smiled, handed me safety glasses and a paper hat and led me across to the distillery. We lingered for a bit on the bridge over the stream, watching the fish swirl and dart below. I met the men who fill the vats, got to throw the grain release lever, and was invited to stand over the mash tubs and breathe deeply the scent of whisky being born. I even received my own souvenir

dedicated craftsmen create an age old product using their hands, their experience, their knowledge and their pride. Employee turnover is almost unheard of, as are workplace injuries. In an age when even the corner grocery store may be computerized, the distillery has none. Need further inducement? Cell phones *don't* work in the Hollow, and contrary to certain TV commercials, Cascade Hollow is the *real* land of happy cows. Whisky begins with a mash of high quality cereal grains, and the spent mash is regularly trucked away—to feed the local livestock.

As he walked me to my car, my guide said “Come back next Saturday, we'll be making charcoal.” The charcoal is not for fuel—the distillery fires are gas fired. Rather, they routinely burn ricks of hard maple to charcoal, and use the charcoal to filter the raw spirit. In fact, they filter it through 21 feet of charcoal. This filtration is what sets Tennessee whisky apart

from the more familiar bourbons of Kentucky.

What of the whisky? Mr. Dickel set out to make a product comparable with the more famous Scottish brands, which is why he elected to use the Scots spelling—“whisky,” with

no “e.” He succeeded. To my taste, it is smooth complex, yet gentle on the tongue, with a chocolate after-taste I have found in no other spirit. While all taste is subjective, if you splurge for a bottle of Old No. 8 (ivory label, 90 proof, \$20 or so), you might find you're no longer interested in \$80 bottles of Scotch. You might, in fact, join the intergalactic George Dickel fan club. Cast your mind back to the glorious days of the original *Star Trek*. Recall Scottie's prized “Saurian brandy” in the outlandish curved bottle? That's a bottle of George Dickel, Laddie.

*Tom Hall is a Wisconsin attorney and writer. He has been thrown out of some of the best bars in the US and UK and believes that nothing is safe to drink unless it is fermented. He is an unabashed fan of Dickel's Barrel Select and Number 12, despite being an alumnus of a Scottish university. More of his misadventures can be found at <http://blogspot.usemorepaper.com>.*

...contrary to certain TV commercials, Cascade Hollow is the REAL land of happy cows.

chunk of charcoal. Outside the distillery we explored the tiny house that once housed Treasury agents, assigned to monitor production and ensure that not a drop escaped untaxed. Up the hill (and, I must add, not part of the regular tour) is the barrel house, where countless gallons of whisky are slowly maturing. The warehouse foreman explained the art of *racking* barrels—rolling the 55 gallon barrels down long wooden ways, and ensuring that, at the end of the run, the bung hole is on top, where it can be easily accessed.

“Do the barrels ever leak?” I asked.

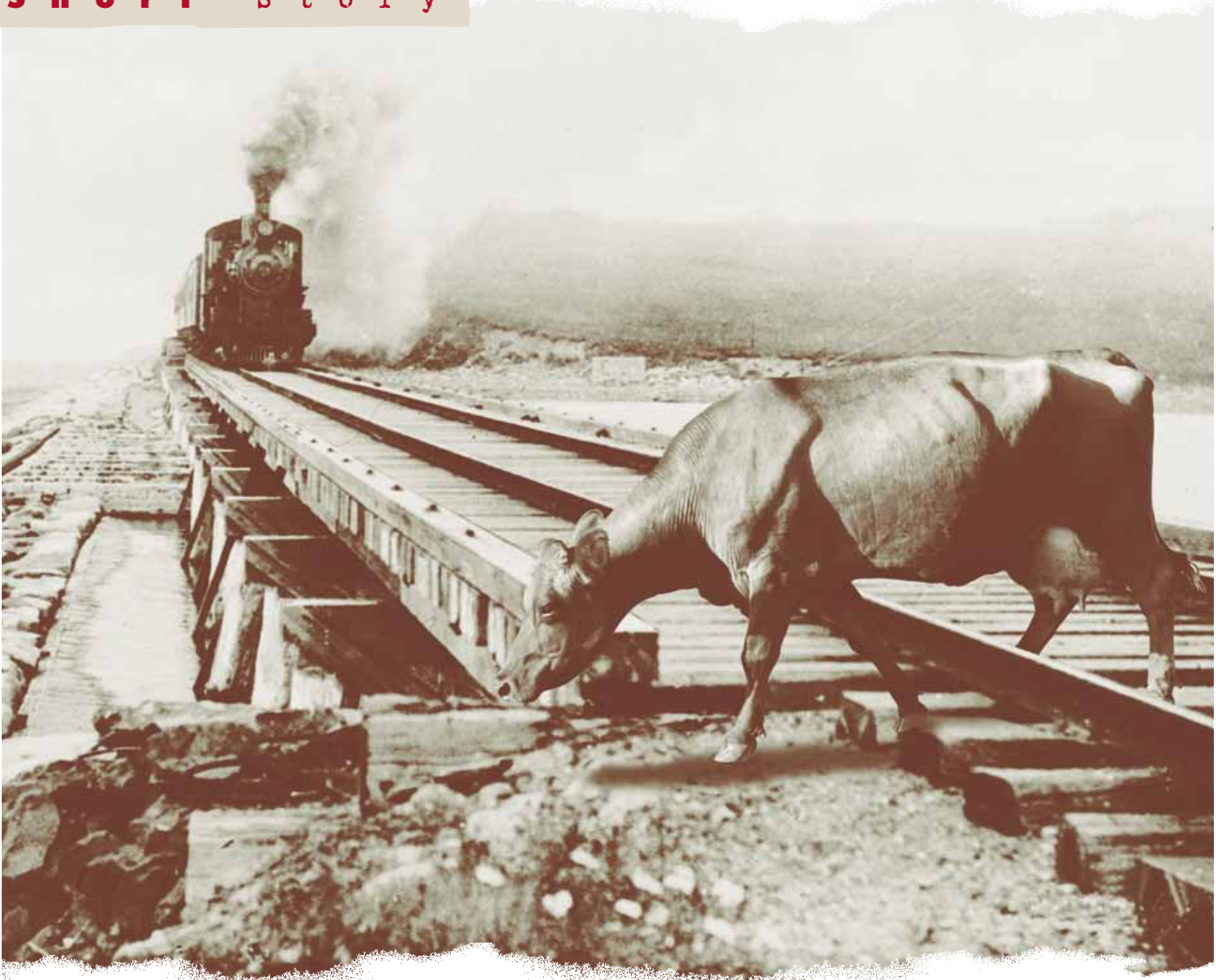
“Sometimes,” came the reply.

“How do you deal with it?”

The answer came with a slow smile: “First I fetch my tin cup and try a sample or three to be sure it is really a whisky leak, and not water from somewhere. If it tastes like whisky to me, I call the other fellas to get their expert opinions as well.”

The Dickel tour is a rare opportunity to step back in time, to watch





## Scales of Justice

A short story by David Dyer



ell us one, Uncle Jess,” wheedled Big Don, half leaning against the front counter, his bulging brown eyes gleaming in anticipation. “Tell us about that carny and his monkey.”

The hint of a smile crept across the old man’s face, but shrugging his shoulders, he continued towards the rear of the store.

I reckon he was in his eighties, ole Jess Haire, but spry as a man half his years. He was rawboned, nigh emaciated, and a body’d be hard pressed not to wonder if he was taking in proper nourishment.

“Hello Mr. Haire,” Peanut saluted, lifting his blood-splattered butcher’s apron to wipe his hands, “What can I get you?”

Standing with legs erect and only his upper torso slanted forward, he peered into the scantily stocked meat case. The old man held this position as if pondering—perhaps trying to recall what he had come after.

Straightening at length he responded, “I reckon nothing, Peanut, nothing tonight. I was just seeing what you had.”

“The case’s low right now, it’s near closing time, come back in the morning.”

“Alright, Peanut.” Abruptly turning, he stepped back towards the front, his movements near robotic, as if his joints were bolted together.

It was a small building, this meat market-grocery, a favorite gathering place for menfolk given to gossip and tale spinning. Its claim to fame was Peanut’s fresh butchered meat and the half-dozen weekly ball boards.



"Come on, Uncle Jess, just one story before you leave," Big Don pleaded.

"Yeah, come on, Mr. Haire," I joined in the appeal.

Exuding a sigh, the old man's body seemed to grow limp as he succumbed to our pleas. We'd heard those stories a hundred times, but always hungered for one more recounting. Old Jess didn't tell a story using only words. He'd employ every part of his body. It's hard to say which was the more entertaining—his words or his gesticulations.

"Which one should I tell?"

"Any of 'em," I chirped, thinking how much I loved his yarns. Now when I say "yarns," I ain't implying there might have been any fabrication in the old man's narratives; I believed every word was gospel truth—I'm talking, here's my right hand to God kind of truth.

"The carny and his monkey," Big Don snapped. (One might suspect that was his favorite).

The old man shrugged, as if saying, not that one.

"What about the Model T?" Don entreated, glancing towards the door and the entering customer. "Evening Jake," he apathetically intoned.

"Evening Don," Jake replied, nodding his hatted head.

Don didn't like Jake Bales, figuring he was just plain ignorant. True, Jake didn't have a lick of formal education, but now and again, he'd pull off a mighty good cut on Big Don. Don never forgave him for those embarrassing moments and would often subject him to a blistering fast grilling to prove Jake's incompetence.

"Jake, if you're so smart, tell me, what's a pecan?" he pronounced it peekan, stressing the pee.

Jake, after a moment of deep thought, answered, "One of them hen-sized birds with great long tail feathers."

Big Don chuckled. "What's a widget, Jake?"

"Ah, that's an easy one Don. It's one

of them short people about so high." Jake held his large hand stretched out about 3 feet or so off the ground.

Frustrated, Big Don, queried, "Well Jake, how do ya spell Jose?"

Jake lifted his russet-hued hat slightly, his forefinger scratching a dab at his hairline afore intoning, "H - O - Z - A, I reckon."

"Man, you're stupid Jake!" Big Don half shouted.

The old man and I nodded a greeting to Jake and we all watched as he strolled towards the store's rear.

"Tell us the one about the farmer and the railroad, Mr. Haire," I suggested.

Old Jess's visage fairly glowed, dipping his head in acquiesce, he began his tale.

make-belief wallet.

"Now, unbeknownst to him, this lawyer he hired was given to drink and was might near out of business. Around Knoxville it was rumored he'd sell a client out for as little as a bottle of cheap whiskey."

The old man hesitated as if allowing time for his words to sink in. Big Don and I made nary a sound; hanging upon the old man's every word, imbibing of each deftly mimed gesture. Suddenly, he shifted his gangly frame from one foot to the other then back again, those glistening, gray-green eyes fairly dancing as he broke the silence.

"Well after a goodly spell, the case finally come to trial, the defense having had it put forward a couple of times. Ole Caleb and his lawyer was there

along with about a half-dozen railroad lawyers, each of 'em dressed in what looked like brand spanking new, three-piece, pin-striped suits. Caleb was dressed in his work overalls and his Knoxville lawyer

had on a navy blue suit so shiny it nigh blinded folk with reflections off the courtroom lights.

"After the court bailiff's, 'Oyez, oyez, oyez' and instruction for all people having business afore the court to draw near, followed by 'God save the United States and this honorable Court,' all those folk what were there to give testimony was told to raise their right hands."

At this, the old man, with back swayed a speck, lifted his right hand in mock swear never skipping a beat in the cadence of his elocution.

"The burly bailiff then cantillated, 'Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help you God?' Whilst answering, 'I do,' ole Caleb noticed a feller on the other side of the courtroom, the town drunk, answering 'I do,' as well. He found that mighty puzzling.

"Caleb's lawyer addressed the judge sounding plenty eloquent, whilst presenting his client's case. The judge seemed to pay little heed to the Knoxville lawyer, and when his oration

The old man hesitated as if allowing time for his words to sink in. Big Don and I made nary a sound.

"I was just a kid, maybe fourteen, when ole Caleb Cunningham brought lawsuit against the Southern Railway. He was plenty mad 'cause a train had run over and killed one of his cows. 'My best milk cow,' he allowed.

"Hearsay had it that the railroad had all them Lenoir City lawyers in their back pocket. Well, Caleb weren't nobody's fool and knowed not to go to court without proper representation, so he drove to Knoxville to find him a lawyer. Asking around on Gay Street, a feller directed him to an attorney's office. Seems it was up in the Burwell Building.

"After telling this lawyer his plight, the attorney agreed to take his case. After a dab of haggling, they agreed on a fee of eight dollars. Reluctantly, Caleb pulled eight crumpled one-dollar bills from his pocketbook and handed 'em over."

In sync with his speaking, the old man reached behind him with his left hand as if retrieving a wallet and his right hand parroted plucking them bills out one-by-one ere pocketing the

ended, he instructed 'Mr. Cunningham' to tell in his own words exactly what had happened. Ole Caleb, spoke right up, telling how he'd found his best milk cow had been runned-over by the train. 'Are you sure it was the train that hit your cow, Mr. Cunningham?' the judge asked. 'Yes sir, your honor, it was the train sure enough; the five o'clock train what passes through my river-bottom field every single day.'

Lifting a scrawny leg as if taking a step backwards, the old man continued with his story.

"The old judge told Caleb he could step back and sit down."

Old Jess mimicked a body being seated. A couple customers holding meats wrapped in brown butcher paper loitered nearby listening to the old man's tale. Jake, after having briefly spoken with Peanut, was now seated on a wooden dope case near Big Don. All eyes and ears were attuned to the old man.

"Well, one of them railroad lawyers in his hundred-dollar suit stood up and addressed the judge. 'Your honor, my client, the Southern Railway, disputes Mr. Cunningham's allegation.' 'Have you any witnesses?' questioned the judge, never looking up, fountain pen in hand, his gray-ing, partially glabrous head bent as he pored over documents of another case."

The old man bent his own head as if examining the tops of his dustless black wingtips. With left arm lifted at the elbow, his fingers and thumb wrapped about an imaginary pen, he made scrawling motions in the air, making a body presume the old judge had been left-handed.

"Yes, your honor," he replied. "Then

call him up here,' instructed the judge, his voice sharp and terse as if annoyed.

"The town drunk, sporting brand new store-bought clothes, sidled to the front, pausing just below the judge's bench. The railroad lawyer started to speak, but was abruptly interrupted by the harried judge. 'What's your name?' he snapped. Stammering, the bibber spoke, 'Shaky, sir—Shaky Spencer, judge.' 'Your given name,' the court bailiff interjected. Shaky looked towards

your honor.' His answer sent titters throughout the courtroom, invoking the judge's admonition to keep quiet."

Old Jess paused, clearing his throat. Gazing into his ancient face with eyes deeply ebbed set over cavernous cheeks and narrow parched lips; I couldn't help wondering just how many more years he'd be around.

"That old judge peered over his glasses at Shaky for a spell, before asking, 'What did you come here to testify about?'

Shaky looked at the railroad's lawyer, his eyes pleading for help. That youthful lawyer kind of cleared his throat before saying, 'Your honor, Mr. Spencer is...' The judge cut him off in mid-sentence, 'I suspect, young fellow, that Shaky, uh, Mister Spencer can speak for himself.'

Turning his attention back to Shaky, the judge asked, 'Alright, Mr. Spencer, what have you to say about this matter?' Everybody in that courtroom was on the edge of their seat kind of leaning forward to hear what Shaky would testify."

Saying that, the old man put both hands out from his sides, elbows bended, palms down, fingers extended and sort of half squatted demonstrating how those courtroom spectators looked that day.

"Shaky swallowed hard and finally spoke.

'Well, your honor,

sir, uh—' Seems Shaky could hardly think of what it was he was supposed to say. Finally recollecting, he begin to incant, 'It was Friday afternoon, sir, uh, your honor, sir, and I was powerful thirsty. I figured I'd go down by the river and get me somethin' to wet my whistle. Uh, uh, I was takin' a shortcut through Caleb's—uh, I mean uh—uh, through Mr. Cunningham's farm when, uh —uh—when I comes across his old Guernsey milk cow."



All eyes and ears were attuned to the old man...he bent his own head as if examining the tops of his dustless black wingtips.

his lawyer who silently mouthed the word 'Bledsoe.'"

The old man pursed his lips, mutely mouthing the same name over-and-over. He glanced first at me and then towards Big Don. We were transfixed as we always were during one of the old man's narratives.

"Well, after several attempts, the lawyer just leaned forward and whispered into Shaky's ear. 'Bledsoe, sir—Bledsoe Spencer's my name,



## Short Story

Old Jess would lift those stovepipe legs, slow and deliberate. His upper and lower leg parts hinging like a stringed marionette, he pantomimed a walk across that field, ere suddenly throwing both arms back in mimicked surprise. After a few seconds, his discourse continued.

"Yeah, ole Shaky was sticking to the story those lawyers had rehearsed with him purdy good. 'Well sir, uh—your honor, I seen she was just standin' thar all by herself, uh—' he covered his mouth and coughed one of them dry wino coughs, the kind what a feller that's wanting a drink coughs. After a few hacks, he kind of cleared his throat, then in a heightened, crackly voice stammered, 'And I was a wonderin' how come she was so durned fur from the barn so near to milkin' time.'

Shaky paused, his dark, BB-like eyes peering about that courtroom."

The old man's eyes glanced back and forth between Big Don and me.

"I reckon ole Shaky was seeing if any of them folks was believing that

looked that old judge dead square in the eye and said, 'Nothin' your honor, being powerful thirsty, I just break into a run towards the river to get me a drank.' The courtroom burst out in laughter causing the judge to pound his gavel several times to restore order."

The old man raised and lowered his right fist rapidly.

"One of them railroad lawyers then stepped forward holding a fifteen foot piece of rope in his hand. 'Your honor, the defense would like to submit this rope removed from the dead cow's carcass into evidence.' Peering over the top of his bifocals, the judge just nodded. He then turned to Caleb Cunningham's lawyer and asked if he had any questions of this witness. The big city lawyer dropped his head a dab saying, 'No your honor.' 'Very

**"Your honor, the defense would like to submit this rope removed from the dead cow's carcass into evidence."**

yarn he was spinning. 'When I got real clos't, your honor, I seen somebody, uh, I seen that somebody had tooken a rope and tied that blame cow to the railroad track.'

"That being said, Shaky, whose hands was sure enough shaking by then, dropped his head and hushed speaking. 'What happened then?' queried the judge. Lifting his head, Shaky



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well,' allowed the judge, 'I reckon you can hightail it for the river now Mister Spencer.' I'm telling you, such laughter resounded through that courtroom even the judge's repeated gaveling could scarcely call it to a halt."

The old man paused. Fetching a plaid handkerchief from his back pocket, he swiped it over his brow, then dabbed it lightly at each corner of his mouth ere folding it neatly and stuffing it back into his pocket. In that instant, a body could catch the weariness in his visage and a dullness in those normally bright eyes. Yes, in that moment, the old man looked every bit his age.

"With the laughter finally subsided, the judge in a low, stern voice addressed Mister Cunningham. 'Have you anything further to say on your behalf?' Ole Caleb Cunningham slowly raised up from off his chair. 'Yes sir your honor.' His cheeks were ablaze with crimson and anybody could tell he was plumb fighting mad."

The old man had a twinkle in his eye whilst he slightly squatted feigning a feller seated, those gangly knees crisply bended, ere slowly straightening to rise. He continued his story with a calm, low voice, and a subdued, almost grave demeanor.

"Old Caleb stepped quickly forward and peered upwards into the judge's eyes. 'Your honor,' the old farmer said, 'the railroad's train not only runned over and killed my best milk cow, they bought off my Knoxville lawyer what I paid eight dollars to represent me with nothing more than a fifth of Old Fitz whiskey. Then they give ole Shaky Spencer, what everybody knows is the town drunk, five dollars and a set of

new clothes to come here today and lie. And your honor, I'm thinkin', iffin they'd have give him ten dollars—"

The old man's voice hesitated, no doubt a pause inserted just for effect, ere deadpanning.

"—he'd have swore that cow was driving the train!"



"I'm telling you, such laughter resounded through that courtroom that even the judge's repeated gaveling could scarcely call it to a halt."

"Again, laughter roared though the courtroom, and this time the old judge made no effort to squelch it. At length the court bailiff stood and lifted both arms then slowly lowered them with palms facing downwards, and the spectators fell silent.

"Well now, that old judge wasn't nobody's fool either. He looked down at ole Caleb standing there in his work overalls, then looked over at them half-dozen railroad lawyers in their fancy new pin-stripe suits. Back and forth, he looked twixt the twain. And as he looked, a body could see them

scales of justice weighing in his cold blue eyes."

The old man held his hands out, his arms tight at his sides, elbows bended and upturned palms full-opened with his scrawny fingers held straight. He'd slowly lift one hand whilst at the same time lowering the other. Up and down, those hands went and his eyes were almost afire from glowing so brightly, as his smallish head turned on its turkey neck from the left then to the right. After a time, those dry, narrow lips moved.

"A quietness rivaling death's vigil fell over that courtroom. Every soul had eyes fixed on the old judge. Finally, he lifted his gavel, letting it kind of hover in mid-air. Then in a voice low and powerful solemn, the venerable old judge spoke. 'Gentlemen, both the patience of this court and the scales of justice have been sorely tested this day. But do know that the patience of justice is ever enduring and her balances weigh sure and true.'

"Sounding his gavel sharply..."

Simultaneous with his words, the old man's hand that had been lifted in illustration, dropped suddenly as if pounding a

gavel against its sound block.

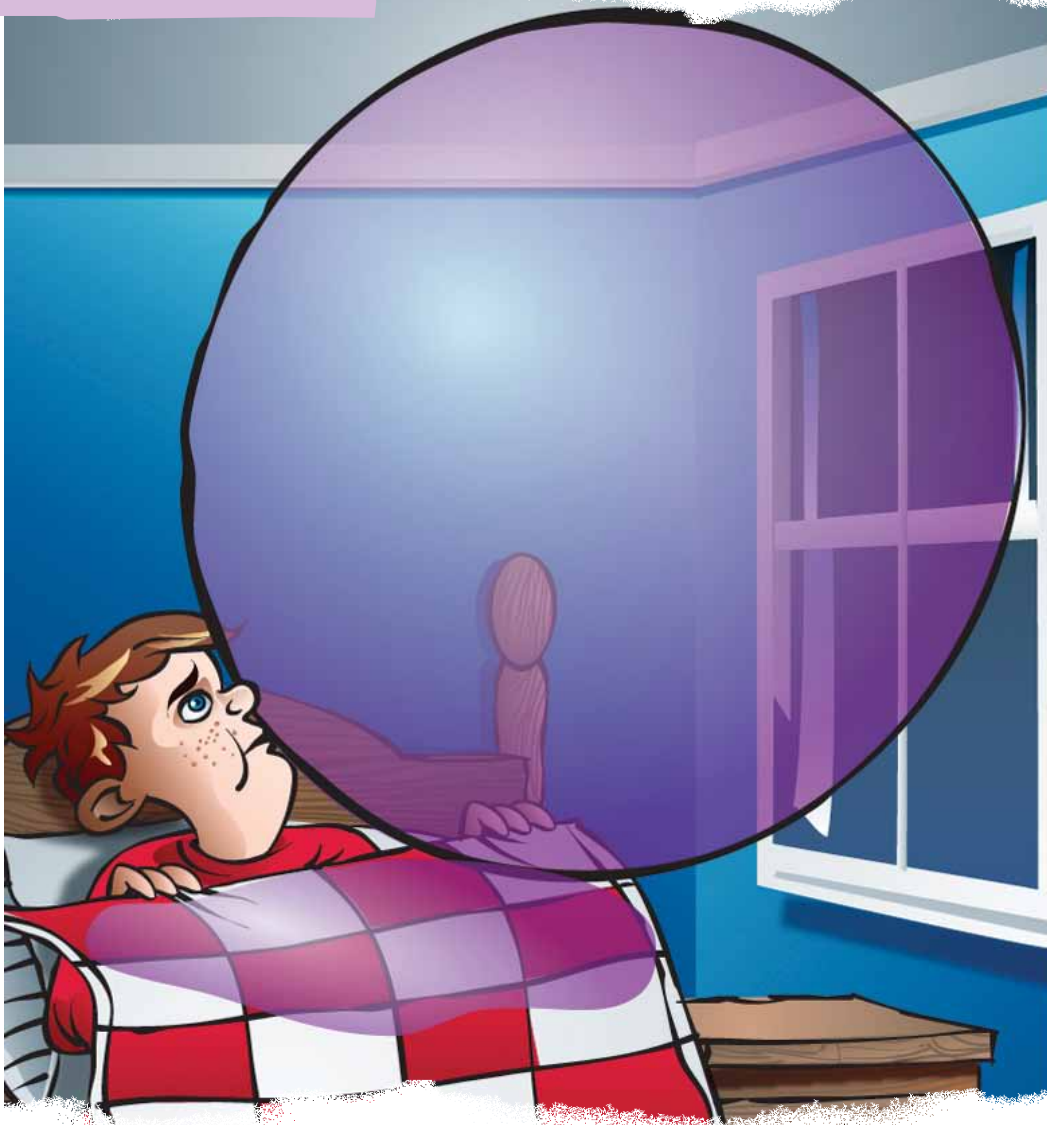
"—that wise old judge thundered, 'Judgment for the Plaintiff in the amount of twenty dollars!'

"Well, I'm telling you, that courtroom erupted with cheers and applause for the greater part of five minutes."

He faintly smiled, no doubt satisfied in his telling, then turned to leave. Big Don stepped quickly to open the door for the old man, both of us silent as he passed into the darkness.

*David Dyer is a Knoxville, Tennessee-based writer.*





# Willy Wonka Grape

by Marshall Lancaster

**M**y pre-middle school days were always characterized by a *what-do-you-know?*, *does-fire-really-burn?*, and *maybe-later-not-now* philosophy. In short, I was stubborn.

Saturday mornings, in certain stretches of youth, were spent viewing cartoons such as “Bugs Bunny,” “The Road Runner,” and “Daffy Duck.” My only other activity of this laid back day, aside from seeing as many cartoons as my parents would allow, was to assist my father on his many trips to Roanoke Rapids, N.C., to corner the right sofa, love seat, or dining room set. Needless to say, these outings

were not my area of expertise, and it had a lot more to do with interest than age. Most kids my age—let’s face it—were indulging in the new fall cartoon line-up on their network of choice (there were three to choose from!). The cartoons were easily a half-day investment. If you missed any of these shows, you would be reduced to silence in all relevant classroom conversations come Monday morning.

One Saturday, my father entered my bedroom and became very adamant about his plans.

“Up, right now. Not later, but now,” my father implored with a tone of urgency. “How do you think we are going to get to the sales with you stretched out in the bed like this?” he queried.

“Okay, okay!” I responded as I stood up, yawned, and started changing for yet another humdrum outing at the local flea markets. It was too early for the response, “Yes, sir.” There would be cheese toast and a mug of coffee awaiting me, enough to tide me over until lunch, which we could maybe get at the Eagle’s dime store lunch

counter just down the street from the flea markets. The heated honey buns at Eagle's were divine at any time of day. We didn't have time for those, though. I could tell. Dad was a man on a mission.

What Dad failed to realize was that it would take a great deal to pique an eight-year-old's interest in furniture. He was fighting forces beyond his control. For one thing, these varnished relics of the past featured no Batman, no Robin, no Steve Austin, and no Evel Knievel. Besides, who would give a boy a silly name like Duncan Fife? Another name that I heard from time to time was Lazyboy, and it seemed to characterize every single person involved in the selling and reselling of certain chairs that were, in my opinion, aptly named *recliners*. At one booth, a friendly person behind the counter greeted me with a warm hello and a "My, how you have grown since last year. What are they feeding you out in the country? Are you drinking that fresh milk?" I just smiled and shyly looked away. Who were these people? Did they know me?

On this day, Dad had given me freedom to roam the whole flea market while he went to pursue his business. Small-town North Carolina loves its flea markets—all of the junk one might possibly need, *or not need*, for one-twentieth of the price. Several tables featured items which looked like playthings from the land of misfit toys in the Christmas show "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer." There were plenty of diamonds in the rough if you took the time to discover them. There was a Stretch Armstrong, for example, that had never been taken out of its box. Many people at these events swore by the phrase "One man's junk is another man's treasure." The only thing I could find of moderate interest was a record player with a 45 rpm of The Kinks' "You Really Got Me" and an Etch-a-Sketch with a damaged dial. Suddenly, Dad approached me with that look on his face, the

you-won't-believe-the-bargain-I-found look, which usually inspired several ungrateful comments from my mother, such as "We don't even own an x, and you bought a y?"; "They saw you coming," or even "There's a sucker born every minute." He balanced three barstools on each arm, insisting that they matched our brown wall paint in the den. He rushed up to the operator of the booth, pulled out his wallet, and slapped down one-hundred dollars in twenties. Then he looked over at me, knowing that I had indulged him an hour in this museum of mundane home life. He was bent on doing me a favor.

"I know you want the gum, so go ahead and put it on the counter. You can get it!" he said.

"Thank you, Pop. This is yummy stuff—sour grape." I had seen commercials for Willy Wonka Grape gum

"I know you want the gum,  
so go ahead and put it on  
the counter. You can get it!"

while watching cartoons. It had to be as tasty as advertised, and I had never tried it.

We loaded the barstools into the truck and tied them together to prevent movement. It wasn't a bad trip, and I could still salvage a few of the cartoons. My father, for whatever reason, did not want me chewing the gum until later. He gave the green light when I returned to the cartoons later that afternoon. He labored as best he could to explain the barstools to my mother. She went on and on about how we would have to buy a bar now. She offered a solution: Judy Smith had an old bar in her attic. Wonder what she wants for it? She might take fifty bucks for it! I bet you could get it for a song. She's your cousin. As they turned their thoughts over about the barstools and the bar they as yet did not own, I decided to start on a second piece of Willy Wonka Grape. It would easily fuse with the first piece and create a big blob of chewing fun, never losing

its flavor and getting rejuvenated with each added piece. Who could stop me? This was my free will after all. The topic of barstools had taken me out of the spotlight as my parents considered whether a bar could be rationalized. Being a young kid, I was not one to weigh in on barstools. However, the idea of a barstool I found somewhat interesting. It might change dining in our house forever. His mind on other things, Dad never asked, "How many pieces do you have left?" He was too busy with his barstools.

I had created this proud blob of artificially-flavored grape chewing satisfaction and had taken on the flavorless gods and won the battle. Before dinner, I submerged this blob in a glass of water, half-filled. The gum would keep until I needed it again. We ate Mom's famous spaghetti for dinner and

discussed a Saturday of great finds at the flea market. Later, Mom inquired as to whether Dad bought me anything at the flea market.

"Just a pack of Willy Wonka Grape. It's delicious!" I replied.

She seemed happy for me. I guess deep down inside she knew that a little boy's heart was with the cartoons on a Saturday morning, but she still enjoyed seeing me have fun with my father. There was a small part of her that sympathized with me. The flea market business could wait, and whoever said I had to make it my hobby? Varnish, ladder back, Duncan Fife, loveseat, dye, velvet, and vinyl were words which were usually lost on a young boy, to say nothing of suede or velour. On the other hand, Tonka, Batmobile, and Bugs Bunny were direct hits. They were real stepping stones on the great path to manhood.

I, of course, returned to my grape blob shortly after dinner and figured I would add a piece or two. As we approached bedtime, I continued to chew—in reality, *smack*—this blob of Willy Wonka Grape. It was my project, and I very stubbornly chewed ad infinitum.

Dad cautioned me from the den,



“Take the gum out of your mouth now. You might choke! I wish I hadn’t bought it. You don’t ever listen to me.”

“Okay, Dad,” I replied. However, I very obstinately continued to chew the grape creation. My blob was so big that it worked the very muscles of my tired jaws. This was no ordinary gum. It was no ordinary blob. It was a flavor-enhanced chewers’ dream. As I chewed laboriously in bed, I could feel myself get sleepy. I started to drift off. Was I headed to the land of Willy Wonka Grape bliss? I imagined tasty pieces of grape gum coming off an assembly line.

I somehow managed to sleep through the night, realizing that I had disobeyed both my father and mother where the gum was concerned. I was a bit groggy in bed. The gum was nowhere to be found. I was very concerned about where the gum might be. I did not even so much as smell it. I knew that I had not eaten it in my sleep. It was much too large for that. Only the wrappers remained of this five-pack of grape gum.

Meanwhile, the scent of Mom’s waffles wafted in the morning air, just like they did almost every Sunday.

In her welcoming way, she said, “Come and get the first blueberry waffle, Marshall!” It was time to start a new day. I decided to join the family at the table for breakfast, and I had really worked up an appetite.

As I rose up from the bed, however, there was a force working against me. My first instinct was to panic. Maybe burglars had broken into the house and tied me up.

“It’s got me! It’s got me! It won’t let me go! Mom! Dad!” I yelled from bed. Had my creation betrayed me? I was immobile.

“What’s the matter?” inquired Mom, smiling, as I attempted to rise once more. “Have mercy! Would you look at his hair?” she continued. “Go get me the scissors! Now! We can cut him out, I believe,” she estimated to Dad.

The purple blob had gone into

attack mode as I slept. It stuck to my hair, bonding immediately with the fitted sheet, in several places. There was no way to escape except by scissors.

of steering clear of gum—any kind of gum—for at least a decade. It was probably time to recognize that my father had been right about a few things. It was just so hard to put absolute trust in a man who did not respect the cartoons with the same veneration which I, a mere third-grader, had. I even got the dictionary out just to define a few of the terms which I

## I imagined tasty pieces of grape gum coming off the assembly line.

Hair, gum, and sheet had become one. In fifteen minutes Mom had officially released me from bondage. I wasn’t sure how I would explain the haircut to friends and family. The sheet would have to be thrown out. No more gum would there be for me. It was off to the land of meat and vegetables. I had tempted the gum fates and learned a very valuable lesson about obeying people who were hoping to develop me into a good listener one day. One must listen to antique-chasing parents when they are trying to impart useful wisdom and guidance. Never lie to a parent or anyone else. I had to give up the Willy Wonka Grape gum. After losing its flavor, it was of no value whatsoever, like any other gum. My grandmother shortly thereafter introduced me to Lifesavers, and I made a point

had heard articulated at these flea markets. I discovered that a loveseat was a piece of furniture designed to seat two people comfortably. I even began to ask my father what some of these words meant. Maybe, I would open up to this furniture lexicon one day, and surely it was best for me that I know these terms since I had to make these journeys with Dad. The knowledge might one day prove useful. Even as I sit now, I am surrounded by a chair and matching ottoman, a coffee table, a sofa in cloth, and several ladder back chairs. The recliner from which I write is bedecked in dark burgundy leather.

*Marshall Lancaster is currently English Department Chairman at St. Vincent Pallotti High School in Laurel, Maryland.*



*Cozy up to the glow.*



## The Ol' 97 & the Arkansas Rice Fields

by Anthony L. Holt

I don't recall, and have no way of knowing for certain, exactly what age I was when I first became acquainted with Shelby Smith and his mother, "Mrs. Zelpha." I do know that they became a huge part of my life until both of them were gone, and they made a lasting impression upon me—one that is accompanied by memories to this day.

I think I was fourteen that fall when Dwight first took me over to help with the rice harvest. For years, Dwight Bradley would drive the combine for Shelby, and since he also had a ten-wheel grain truck, he would also haul grain to Riceland Foods at Tuckerman. For me, the joy of working in the river bottoms never grew boring.

The Smith Farm was a near magical place upon which I would free-roam

for two decades or more and learn to love and enjoy, although perhaps not as much as Shelby. The first paper that I published was in Jackson County's *Stream of History Quarterly* about the Smith ferry that was operated on the Black River during the late 1800s and early 1900s. After Shelby died, I would go over and walk through the old garage and tractor shed and return as many things as I could to the correct

place where they "lived," as Shelby had always done. As time passed, more and more people just simply pillaged through all the treasures from generations of Smiths that had lived there, and what they didn't take, they simply discarded upon the ground. In time, someone would also burn the entire place to the ground with all the things that remained inside.

Dwight eventually did grow tired of the work and worked for himself on his own farm while I stayed around as long as I could. I think I worked something like 18 autumns helping Shelby in some way. During the fall of 1986, while attending Harding University, I could only help on the weekends and couldn't wait until my last class



dismissed on Friday to head home and to the bottoms with my shotgun. I was unable to help during the fall of 1987, as my schedule at Arkansas State would simply not allow it. That fall I helped Cleo Watkins, Sr. on his farm (on the western side of Crowley's Ridge near Bono) get his rice and corn out. The following fall, however, I knew when it was time to head to the bottoms and take my place.

The day that Shelby introduced me to the "Ol' 97" marked a union that would last for numerous years. Apparently, Massey Ferguson didn't officially make their Model 97 Rice Tractor. As one of the gauges would indicate, the tractor was actually a Minneapolis Moline of some model that had been repainted in the traditional Massey Ferguson colors. Even though Shelby had once told me, I didn't see it until years later when the paint had faded—when the light hit the front of the tractor in just the right way, you could see the actual MM model number through the red.

At the age of 14, this particular Ol' 97 was a treasured, vintage antique, but fully functional. It had large flotation tires in the rear by which you gained access over the drawbar to the oversized spring-loaded seat. The massive hand clutch lever was, of course, on the right and must have been between three and four feet long. The gear shifter was between the driver's knees beneath the steering wheel complete with knob. The PTO lever was under the right side of the seat, and it took a bit of experience in order to roll it into position as you carefully applied the clutch.

When you would need to unload a buggy full of rice, you would have to go down to the carburetor and gently move the linkage in just a certain way to slow the old six-cylinder motor down even more than what the linkage allowed. The front end was narrow with tires like you would have typically

found on a combine of its day—narrow with one rib. With a little experience, you could nearly drive the old tractor with rusty round buggy in tow almost anywhere, especially after you had cut a set of ruts to the combine in which to travel back out of the field. The motor on the old thing was huge with three large heads, one of which was MM yellow (from when Shelby had to replace it) and was fueled by propane.

Driving the 97 was a unique experience. The combination of the hand clutch, seat on the rear, lack of a three-point hitch, narrow front and wide rear with huge fenders that flopped slightly made it some contraption. I can understand why the style didn't last (better equipment was being produced), but it had its place and time in American

the field. I also soon learned the right way to cross levees without becoming high-centered. Shelby had to come and get me off of the levee the first time. To do this, he put the tractor in a gear that I did not know existed and got enough speed while astraddle of the levee until he could turn the wheels, getting the tire out of the furrow. Then, he quickly turned the wheel back into the levee and crossed it.

One season, my school schedule did not allow me to get to the field until late in the afternoon on some days. I would get there in just enough time for Shelby to head to Tuckerman, dump a load and then make it back by the time I had another ready to go or, in some instances, would have the buggies filled and be waiting on him to return.

On one day I reached the field and Shelby looked at his watch and the fuel gauge on the 97. The only fuel that we had up in the field in any of the tanks was in the Wilson Bend—

**Shelby got in the seat, motioned for me to sit on the fender, and then instructed me to never drive his tractor the way he was about to drive it.**

farm history, especially on the Smith Farm. I remember seeing a truckload of Belarus tractors on a Wednesday evening before Bible study at Swifton that resembled the old MM design. They were some thirty plus years out of date, but the Belarusians were making them as if they were new technology and Lloyd Hulett, my granddad and I got a good laugh about them.

The first time I ever rode on the Ol' 97, Shelby reached in his pocket and pulled out a paper towel, a staple on the Smith Farm, and made himself some ear plugs. I was initially puzzled about that, but I soon discovered the reason. The exhaust pipe on the old thing was probably five inches in diameter and pointed in such a way that the roar was directed towards the driver. I made my own custom ear plugs from then on, too. He showed me how to drive it, find reverse, roll the PTO lever into place and set the carburetor. I learned quickly to cut the ruts to the combine before you actually pick up the load, or it will take you some time to slip out of

opposite of the old Samp and Johnny Wilson Farm, just across the river. Shelby got in the seat, motioned for me to sit on the fender, and then instructed me to *never* drive his tractor the way he was about to drive it. He reached down and found *yet another* gear that I had never discovered, pushed the throttle as high as it would go, and we proceeded around the east side of the brake and off to the Wilson Bend. I'm not sure how fast we were actually traveling, but the flopping of the fender upon which I was sitting prompted me to believe that we were nearly able to take flight. We filled the tractor with fuel and then proceeded back around to the southeast corner of the brake at the end of the airstrip in the pasture.

On the angle-iron framework underneath the hopper on the old rusty buggy was an assortment of old wooden poles, relics of many years of pushing rice out of the inside of the buggy. In time, some of these old poles would rot in two and have to be discarded or simply fall off along the way. I never

did throw away a pole that was still capable of riding on the undercarriage for another season. In spite of the fact that these were no longer of any use for punching rice and, although Shelby and I never spoke of them, I think it was understood that they had earned their place there. One fall, Shelby instructed me to go and cut a new pole for the season. The pole was some 12 to 15 feet long and was used to punch into the auger the remaining five to ten bushels of rice that would stick to the inside of the rusty buggy.

There is no way in written words that I can adequately describe just how specific Shelby's instructions were about anything. He provided so much detail that it was as if you were reading a technical instruction manual about something as simple as getting the bow saw from behind the truck seat. Everything had its own place at which it "lived."

We once had to make a repair on the combine header's sickle and were close enough to the pasture that we could simply walk from the truck with the necessary tools, cross the outside levee and make the repair. Every one of the perhaps hundreds of tools or attachments that resided in Shelby's toolbox had its own special place *to live*. On that occasion, we were able to make the repair relatively quickly with me running hammers, punches and vise grips to them.

When Shelby returned to the tailgate and saw the way in which I had replaced everything in his toolbox he wanted to know what in the world I had done to his toolbox. We were in a hurry to get back in the rice, but he stopped and emptied everything out of the box onto the tailgate and then meticulously put everything back in its place where it *had lived* for years. I can remember him saying something to the effect that "if you had done that to Dad's toolbox you would have gotten your backside skinned," a direct

quote as best as I can recall with the exception of one word that his dad, Ollie used instead of "backside."

Shelby told me something to the effect, "Go to my pickup and behind the seat on the passenger's side behind the funnel wrapped in an old tee shirt and inside the Walmart bag and get the bow saw and go cut us a new punching pole."

It was the first of many times I would experience the ceremonial cutting of the punching pole. I always tended to overdo many things, putting too many nails in a board, welding an extra bead on something that didn't need it, and in this case, I cut a hackberry punching pole with a fork on the small end and some two and a half inches in diameter. Had the pole actually been dry it would

**"If you had done that to Dad's toolbox, you would have gotten your backside skinned."**

not have been so heavy. Being five foot six, it was all that I could do to flip the pole over the side of the buggy and into the rice. Still, it was my first punching pole and I was resolved to use it.

Later that week, Shelby had to empty several buggies of rice while I was at school. When I made it to the field he told me that pole "would hair lip a gorilla," (whatever that means). I agreed that it was a bit much and went and got the saw, proceeded into the brake and cut a new one. This time I picked out a light one. A day or two later, Shelby again had to buggy some rice, and when I made it to the field he asked, somewhat puzzled, what type of pole I had cut that was so light. It was Pawpaw. It made it through the season with faithful service and rode on the bottom of the buggy for several years. When we retired the buggy—after Shelby bought his last combine, (an 860 Massey Ferguson, which held more rice than the old round, rusty buggy would hold)—the Pawpaw pole was still on the undercarriage.

It was almost an art to correctly and safely punch the rice out of the buggy. You had to roll the PTO lever into place as you moved the clutch forward, set the throttle, remove the pole from beneath the hopper and climb the ladder on the tongue of the buggy. At the top of the ladder you had to swing the pole over the top and into the rice, but not into the auger. The buggy had undergone some transformations over the years, including an extra ring, which had been added to the top.

For Shelby, being about 6' 4" tall, this was no problem. For me, on the other hand, it was quite a challenge. I had to hang my arm over the top of the buggy and wrap my leg around the ladder in such a way that I would not fall off. Then, I would have to attempt to punch the rice into the auger. I had

always assumed that if I did accidentally put the pole in the auger that it would bind and kill the tractor motor at such a slow speed. I was wrong. Once, and only

once, I let the pole get into the auger and knew instantly that I was in trouble. I knew that when I let go of the pole it would go all over the inside of the buggy and possibly hit me as I hung over the top ring. When the motor did not die after a few revolutions of the auger, I knew that I couldn't hold onto the gyrating pole forever. I decided that I would quickly let go of the pole, get out of the way and scurry down the ladder and shut the PTO off. I tried my best to time the events, but I don't think any planning would have allowed for a safe escape. As soon as I released the pole, it made about two revolutions inside the buggy and then proceeded to thrash me on the forearm, which was keeping me from falling off of the ladder. I did manage to get down the ladder and shut off the PTO.

When Shelby arrived back at the field from Riceland, he immediately knew that something was wrong by the expression on my face. He asked what had happened and I showed him my bruised and bleeding arm. He dropped



everything and drove me to see the medic, his mother, friend and teacher, Mrs. Zelpha, whose idea of a first aid kit was methiolate and bandaids. You simply must experience the burn of methiolate on such a wound in order to fully understand how badly it burns. I have made reference to the accident a few times in my life since and said that I never put the punching pole in the auger again because the treatment for such was about as painful as the experience itself.

After Shelby died, and before his equipment was sold, I tearfully recovered the old Pawpaw pole from the belly of the old, rusty, round buggy and placed it in the loft of the barn that I had built at my old home place and instructed Corey, my son, to never destroy it. The insects had really worked on the light, soft wood over

the years and the bark had nearly all slipped off, but it was still enough in tact that I fondly remembered its cutting and purpose. "Frog" Light, an equipment dealer from near Portia,

to sitting in the sun and not being used. The sad expression on the old tractor's gauges indicated that it was out of place and naked without the old rusty round buggy and assortment of punching poles in tow.

I stopped and visited my old friend one last time in the summer of 2006 and reminisced about the number of times I had crawled up into the seat.

**Anthony Holt** was born in Jackson County, Arkansas and lived in the New Home Community near Swifton until his late

bought the Ol' 97 for about \$800 when Shelby's family sold the equipment and to this day it still sits, for sale, near the highway just east of Portia.

I stopped and visited my old friend one last time in the summer of 2006 and reminisced about the number of times that I had crawled up in the seat, bugged a load of rice out of the field and then fetched the punching pole to help the last ten bushels of rice on its way to the global food supply.

The Ol' 97's paint had faded and its tires were more cracked than ever, due

20s. His family raised rice, soybeans, soft red winter wheat and grain sorghum. He has taught both high school and college courses for 18 years and also preached at two small churches in NE Arkansas for 13 years. He currently teaches biology at the University of Arkansas Community College at Morrilton. He and his wife, Camille, and their two youngest sons live in Perryville, Arkansas, where pine trees are grown rather than rice and mosquitoes.

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# The Last Bus to Georgia

(With time to spare, go by air!)

by Ron Burch

**Y**ou're gonna what?" Bob peered at me over the top of his silver-rimmed bifocals. His look said it all...he thought I was nuts.

"Yep, right after I got my pilot's license, I promised my wife that if she'd go along with the purchase of an airplane, I'd fly her to see her mom and dad anytime she wished. Well, next Thursday is *Thanksgiving* and she *wishes* to spend it with her parents."

"They still live in Florida?"

"Uh huh, in Dunedin, just north of Clearwater. It'll take us about three hours in the Cessna Cardinal—ten plus if we drive."

"Ron, how long have you had your private license?"

"Four years last August."

"Do you have an instrument rating?"

"Nope, not yet, Anyway, I shouldn't need one. The weather looks great."

Bob shook his head. "Buddy, this is late November. The weather can turn rotten before you know it—heck, a slow-moving front can stall across north Florida and leave your butt stranded for days. Instrument rating or not, you're just asking for trouble this time of year."

Now, since this was the same guy that gave me fits about flying a single engine airplane at night, I brushed it off.

"Aw, come on, Bob. You're just spoiled. Not every pilot gets to fly corporate jets with all the bells and whistles like you have on the *Jet Commander*. Flying a 400-mph airplane with dual everything would spoil me, too."

Bob was my mentor—especially

when it came to flying. Among other things, Bob had been chief pilot for the State of Alabama. Now he was head of the aviation department for a major utility company in Atlanta and the chief pilot of a sleek Rockwell 1121 Jet Commander, tail number N56AG.

It was 1976, and I'd been a private pilot for four years. We'd owned two different airplanes. The first was a 1962 *Cessna Skyhawk*, painted two tones of the ugliest green you've ever seen. Now, we owned what to me is still the best-looking, single-engine airplane Cessna ever made: a *Cessna Cardinal*.

Without wing struts, she was sleek as a '57 Chevy. Parked on the ramp, she sat low to the ground. In the air, she outperformed all the competition. The Cardinal was the first Cessna to use a laminar flow wing, so she didn't fly like the other Cessna singles. She also wasn't nearly as forgiving of slop-



py piloting, especially during landings. Approach the runway too fast, and the Cardinal would float a few feet off the tarmac until she—not you or your passengers—was ready to land. If you tried to rush it, the Cardinal would stall abruptly and often without warning. If in the process, you hit too hard on the nosewheel, she would wheelbarrow down the runway, nearly out of control—a trait that ripped the firewall out of many such airplanes.

These bad habits earned the Cardinal an undeserved nasty reputation and lowered their resale value. Perhaps that's why I was able to buy this four-year-old airplane for less than the price of today's Mini-Cooper. The logic I used on my wife to get the deal approved was that with a faster airplane, we could be at her parent's home north of Clearwater, Florida in less than three hours. Heck, we could even go for short holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas!

So on the afternoon of November 23, 1976 we hopped in the Cardinal and headed south on Victor 97, the low altitude airway that stretches from northwest of Atlanta to southwest Florida. Thanks to a

weak, slow moving cold front, the skies were clear, and at least over the northern portion of the route, we even had us a tailwind.

We landed at the St. Petersburg/Clearwater International airport in under two-hours and forty-eight minutes. My wife was impressed. And even though, after eloping with their teenage daughter, I wasn't exactly the son-in-law they wanted—so were her parents. After all, not one of their friends had children that came to see them in their own airplane!

I was happy, too. Flying brought a freedom from the work-a-day world that only comes from total immersion. It was also something I could do that made me feel special.

On Wednesday, the day after we arrived, my wife went shopping with

her mother, while I laid out in the sunshine at the motel. The holiday the next day was great. My wife's uncle, an experienced Navy flyer, was also there, and we had fun swapping flying stories. Good company, great food, a good football game—who could ask for anything more?

Then on Thanksgiving night, the weather forecast brought some unsettling news. The weak cold front that



**"Okay, Sky King," she announced,  
"At 11:35, we're catching  
a Greyhound to Atlanta."**

pushed us along our way on Tuesday was now backing up as a warm front. According to the forecast, the weather in Central Florida should remain good; however, rain and low ceilings were expected to develop in northern Florida and southern Georgia during the day on Friday, and remain throughout the weekend.

Was Bob right? Was that knot in my stomach tension or the second piece of pumpkin pie?

Now, weather is a huge consideration for low altitude flying—especially when the pilot lacks an instrument rating. I was working on the rating; but without it, our flying was limited to visual flight rules—at least 1,000-foot ceiling and three miles visibility. The warm front could bring the clouds down much lower. Worse still,

if fog accompanied the low ceilings, we'd be ground-bound for sure.

On the drive back to the motel, I noticed that the moon had a ring around it—a sure sign of increasing moisture in the atmosphere.

Friday morning in Central Florida dawned bright and clear. So far, so good. But to be on the safe side, I called Flight Service to see what the weather was like to the north. The news there wasn't so good. From Atlanta south to Macon and Valdosta, the clouds and visibility were presently still good enough for visual flight, but conditions were expected to deteriorate rapidly by early afternoon. The ceiling was forecast to drop to 800 broken with visibilities under three miles by 4:00 PM. On the hour, Jacksonville and Gainesville reported ground fog with visibility less than one mile and sky obscured; however, it was expected to burn off by 10 AM and become partly cloudy.

I made the decision to try and outrun the approaching weather.

"We'd better head for home." I told my wife. She was disappointed to have to cut the trip short but understood my concern. An hour later, we'd said our good-byes and were airborne. Rather than fly the airway

a few miles out over the gulf to Cross City in the crook of the panhandle, we decided to take a more easterly route—one that would take a bit longer, but one that had more places to land should that be necessary.

Before we ever reached Ocala, the clouds were on the increase. By the time we overflew the airport at Gainesville, the cloud bases were down to 2000 feet. As we crossed into Georgia, we had to descend to the VFR minimum altitude of 1000-feet to stay clear of clouds, and even then, wispy trails of lower clouds often impeded our view of the ground.

Radio chatter from the control tower in Valdosta confirmed our observations that the ceiling and visibility were dropping rapidly. Flight service reported the same conditions

in Albany, Macon and Atlanta. Then, I heard a student pilot somewhere in our vicinity telling air traffic control that he was at 3000 feet over the Valdosta VOR—a high frequency navigational aid—and wanted a special VFR clearance to land. (A SVFR clearance allows operations in visibility as low as one-mile as long as you remain clear of clouds.)

We were scud running at 1000 feet, and the clouds above us formed a solid deck. There was no way that dude was clear of clouds at 3,000 feet, and I wanted no part of a mid-air collision.

At the time, Lake City was reporting scattered to broken clouds at 3,000-feet and visibility greater than five miles. With good weather behind us, we made the proverbial 180-degree turn and headed back.

The Lake City airport has a non-FAA controlled tower. As we approached, their landing instructions were like none I'd ever received: "Cardinal calling Lake City. You can land any runway you like—you're the only aircraft in the area. Hey Joe, get that forklift over to hangar five and load those crates."

A national motel with a restaurant was a short ride away, and one of the nice folks at the airport gave us a lift. We checked in, determined to make the best of it.

Our room smelled musty, so I turned on the air conditioning. As is the custom, my wife went to inspect the bathroom. When she returned, she informed me that the bathroom was alive with mold and mildew. She said, "THIS WON'T DO!" and wanted another room. That was okay with me, but she'd have to handle it. I was lurking by the magazine rack as she approached the desk clerk.

"Sir," she said politely, "you gave us a room on the front side by the parking lot. Since we don't have a car, it would be more convenient for us if we could have one that faced the inside."

The clerk looked perplexed but

gave her a key to a different room. Accustomed to being the beast of burden, I loaded all the gear on my back and took it to the new room around the corner of the building. My wife was already there. As I reached for the door, she came out shaking her head. "This one's worse than the first one," she exclaimed.

It was back to the front desk.

"I hate to be a nuisance. But this room is right by the pool. With the kids swimming and splashing, I'm afraid the noise will keep us awake.

We pulled into Atlanta at 5:05 am, averaging far better than the 70-mph speed limit for the 322-mile trip.

Do you have something farther away?"

The clerk handed her a rack of keys. "Lady, no one's going to be swimming in the rain, but we've got thirty-five empty rooms. Pick one you like and return the rest." She did.

As night fell, we walked across the parking lot to the restaurant for dinner. The fog was as thick as pea soup. A Florida Highway Patrolman in the parking lot confirmed that the weather was bad all up and down the Interstate. A call to flight service before bedtime revealed that the entire southeast was socked in. The next morning, things were no better.

By afternoon, we began playing a game we call briefer roulette: In four years of flying, we'd learned that when I called Flight Service, even in marginal weather, I usually got an optimistic forecast, sometimes with just a hint of caution. When my wife called, it was all gloom, doom and foreboding. This time, neither of us got a forecast to celebrate. In fact, our frequent calls to Flight Service must have annoyed the briefer. He told my wife, "Lady, if you'll give me your phone number, when I can get Eastern off the ground in Jacksonville, I'll give you a call."

At dinner, I asked my wife how she'd like to spend Christmas in Lake City. She said, "That does it. We're getting out of here." She grabbed the

Yellow Pages and the telephone and began making calls. "Okay, Sky King," she announced, "At 11:35, we're catching a Greyhound to Atlanta."

Traveling by bus was new to us. First, no reservations are required. Second, you can't request a window seat. Third, they only take cash—no checks or credit cards. Fortunately, none of this presented a problem.

Our bus was coming from Miami, and it was almost an hour late. Its final destination was Detroit. While we waited at the terminal, another passenger arrived carrying a brown paper bag. He nodded and quickly disappeared into the men's room. He emerged a few minutes later looking scrubbed and clean shaven and wearing a fresh shirt, albeit one

with the largest palmetto bug my wife had ever seen perched on his left shoulder. Some of the other passengers that soon arrived weren't so neat and clean or so well-shaven.

Soon the lights of the Greyhound bus lit-up the rain drops on the windows as she turned the corner and came into view. She slid into the diagonal slot out front marked "arrivals and departures." Filling the heavy night air with the smell of diesel fuel, she let out a loud gasp as she came to a halt.

The door swung opened.

My wife and I climbed aboard and took a seat about half way toward the rear. As we walked down the narrow, unlit aisle, I noticed something sticky on the floor. I heard a nasty cough coming from the rear of the bus. Was this to be the *Midnight Cowboy* all over again? I decided to try and get some shut eye. My wife however, remained wide-eyed and fully awake. It would be an interesting ride.

All the way up a foggy Interstate 75, rain pelted the bus's windshield as the big tires cut through giant puddles of standing water. The terrible driving conditions didn't slow our driver at all. He was in and out of the right lane, passing everything in sight. The bus made off-interstate stops in Valdosta and Tifton and then had a half-hour layover in Macon. We pulled



## Southern Flying

into Atlanta at 5:05 am, averaging far better than the 70-mph speed limit for the 322-mile trip.

Once inside the station, a trip to the men's room was the first order of business. Looking in the mirror, I realized that I now looked just like the rest of the bus riders—wrinkled clothes, bags under my eyes, in need of a shave.

My dad was an early riser, so we knew we could call on him for a ride home. My old man was like a gerbil on steroids—high energy and always on the go. In those days, he was in building material sales and drove a station wagon, usually filled to the brim with brick samples.

Long before we began looking for him at the curb outside the bus station, someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was my dad. Faster than a Greyhound in the rain, he'd parked his station wagon in one of the empty slots in the boarding area out back. He said, "Hey folks, ready to go?" We were.

Three weeks later, a friend with a twin offered to fly me to Lake City to pick-up the airplane, *IF* I paid for the gas. When we arrived, the weather was only slightly better than when I left. Still without an instrument rating, I flew most of the trip home at 500-foot directly over I-75. Between Macon and Atlanta, the weather cleared and the landing at Peachtree-DeKalb air-

port was uneventful.

I'd had enough of Florida in the fall. I'd also learned an expensive lesson: Fuel for my airplane cost \$55; a rental car was \$105. The motel in Clearwater was \$177; the one in Lake City was \$68. The bus ride home was \$65. The fuel bill for my pal's 300-hp twin at 90-cents a gallon was over a hundred bucks. Parking my airplane in Lake City for almost month cost me \$105.

Worst of all, Bob was right—again. With time to spare, go by air.

*After retirement from a career in advertising and marketing, Ron Burch has authored a number of published essays and magazine articles, in addition to a full-length novel.*



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