

Issue Number Twenty

Summer/Fall 2017

# SouthernReader

AN ONLINE MAGAZINE ABOUT LIFE IN THE SOUTH



## Rocket Man

*From Tennessee to NASA*

## Johnnie Reb's

*The Atlanta landmark*

## Grin & Bury It

*Lisa Love's Life*

## Another Man's Shoes

*A highway diary entry from '77*

## The 4th of July

*Fiction by Chuck Holmes, set in 1955*

## Welcome Home, Brownie

*A short story by  
Charlton Hillis*

## Mud Island Monorail

*Terror over the Mississippi*

## The Dating Tip

*The joys of the college social scene*

## Cloverine Salve-ation

*A little dab'll do ya*

## Daddy's in the Closet

*....and he's staying there*

*David Skinner*

## Taming the Lines:

## The Roaring Twenty

By David Ray Skinner

C

reating *SouthernReader* was a dream of mine. Literally. It was 2001, and I was just discovering the power and capabilities of Adobe Acrobat and PDFs. Also, although, at that point, the internet had been around for a while, it was quickly becoming more of a necessity than a luxury.

By then—at the dawn of the new millennium—I had been art directing conventional print magazines for over 20 years, and, although I loved the printing process with the smell of the ink and roar of the presses, I also knew that print on paper was slowly being replaced by pixels on screens.

***And that's when I had the dream.***

And yeah, I know—in the last issue, I talked about creating an illustration for a college art project from a dream, so maybe it is a recurring theme, but you'll have to wait for the next issue to really know for sure.

In the case of the birth of *SouthernReader*, I dreamed that I was e-publishing an online magazine—created as a flippable PDF—called *Something Reader* (actually, upon waking, I could only remember the *Reader* part), based on the old *Weekly Reader* that we all subscribed to back in elementary school. When I awoke, with the dream still fresh in my mind, I went online to check out available domains with “Reader” in the name. My goal was to put together an online magazine about the South, so *SouthernReader* was the obvious name, and, it being the early days of domain registration, *SouthernReader.com* was, in fact, available.

That first issue went live in the Summer of 2001, and it featured a young girl on the cover eating a watermelon and included three articles: “Big Chicken” (a short story that I had written and shopped around in the mid-’90s), “Loosening the Bible Belt” (an article about camp meetings in the South by my preacher friend, Ralph Devereaux), and “The Rising Popularity of Biscuits” (an entertaining piece about a favorite Southern staple, written by my college friend and one-time campus newspaper columnist, Nelda Hill). I had initially done the cover illustration with the young girl holding a catfish that she had just caught, but because I wanted a consistent “Southern icon” that would appear on every

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"We are not able to publish your short story, 'Big Chicken,' although you do write with intelligence and a flair."

cover, I changed the catfish into a watermelon (I thought a watermelon had *more legs* as an icon than a catfish).

As for my short story contribution, I had written it several years before, and I had grown weary of gathering rejection notices, although several were quite complimentary. An editor at one well-known publication sent me a handwritten note that said, "We are not able to publish your short story, "Big Chicken," although you do write with intelligence and a flair." I immediately wrote back, "Shows you what you know...it was a ball-point pen..." It also encouraged me to go back and "fluff up" the big chicken and turn it into a novelette (it's now on iBooks and on Amazon).

As for my collection of rejection notices, it reminded me of the rich kid who loved basketball, but wasn't old enough to play with the big boys, so his father had a full-size court put into his backyard. *SouthernReader* was my backyard basketball court.

However, less than a month after we got the first issue online, the national horror of 9/11 changed everything. And we're still living in the shadows of that day. It changed our view of national security, our laws, and our very cultural mindset. It put a spotlight on evil, one that we will never be able to fully extinguish. For a while, I thought about scrapping the whole notion of an online literary magazine. It just seemed trivial in light of the darkness that fell across our nation. But then I realized...*that really was the point of the e-mag*—to bring perhaps a slight grin and just a little bit of light into the world, hopefully as a contrast to the shadows that we would come to experience and try to dodge.

And aside from the occasional Tennessee ax murder story, we've tried to feature the lighter side of the South, including stories about everything from embarrassing moments in church to moonshine-fueled UFO's. We've also run articles about Appalachian shape note music and great Southern musicians such as **Dallas Frazier**, and **Lefty Frizzell** (we've also written about the off-the-beaten path, decidedly non-Southern band ***The Shaggs***, but that was because we love the unusual as much as we love the Southern aspects of American life).

This 20th issue has some of the classic articles from previous *SouthernReaders*, along with some brand-new pieces, and we're excited about where this crazy journey is taking us. The last issue of *SouthernReader* had over 20,000 visitors, from all over the world, including over a thousand viewers from Japan, alone.

Hmm...*catfish sushi*, anyone?



[Click here to hear my old song, "Catfish Boulevard"](#)  
(formerly called "Watermelon Boulevard")

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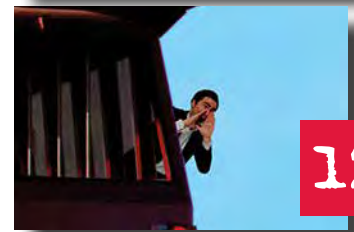
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## Grin and Bury It

An embarrassing letter to a friend from Lisa Love

Dear Sandra,

You know how I'm always telling ya that you just shoulda been here? Well, I really mean it this time—*YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN HERE* this weekend. It was more entertaining than cable TV (and as always, half the price)! I will try in vain to do this story justice; Buddy and my Aunt Myrtie both survived, so that in itself is no small feat! I, however, am seriously considering taking up drinking!

Where do I start? I think I told you that my great aunt from Memphis was coming to stay with us to celebrate her 85th birthday. Lord, she is a formidable woman (think: *Bea Arthur as Maude and then make her a smidge more strapping*). Aunt Myrtie is a hard, somber woman, enjoying neither humor nor kindness; I swear she makes Osama Bin Laden look warm and fuzzy. Why she wanted to make the trip to Atlanta to celebrate her birthday is beyond me—possibly the rest of her family escaped by way of the Witness Relocation program or something. (*Note to self: remember that option for future reference.*)

You think I am being too harsh? Perhaps. I do credit her with my *FIRST* baptism. Yes, Sandra, I said my first. When I was six years old, Aunt Myrtie came for her annual pilgrimage to Atlanta. Like clockwork, come Sunday morning, my granddaddy (her brother)

Aunt Myrtie is a hard, somber woman, enjoying neither humor nor kindness; I swear she makes Osama Bin Laden look warm and fuzzy.

invited her to go to church with us. *Oh goody!* Anyway, I *ADORED* church, but being young, I tended to get restless, sitting on the hard wooden pews for over an hour. I would crawl back and forth between my mama, my granddaddy and my brother and sister—sitting or lying on each one of them in turn for 15 minutes or so. Honestly, I just thought I was giving the whole family a chance to enjoy my company, so that no one would feel left out during the service. However, Aunt Myrtie wasn't quite so enamored with me. During the altar call at the end of the sermon, as I headed toward my granddaddy at the end of the pew—climbing over my mom for the umpteenth time—I heard my aunt whisper loudly, “If that girl moves one more time, I am going to take her out back behind this church and whip her myself.”

My first instinct was to turn and see who she was talking 'bout. My second instinct was to get away from her as far and as fast as possible. My second instinct prevailed. Without missing a beat, I sailed right past my granddaddy, walked straight out of that pew, and with head held high, marched my little six-year-old self down that aisle and asked the preacher if he

would please save me!!! I was baptized a week later. I guess you could say Aunt Myrtie scared the hell out of me.

It's forty-some-odd years later, and I am still a quivering pillar of Jello where this lady is concerned; when she called to set this birthday visit up with two days notice, I just froze and kept mumbling, “*Of course, of course*” over and over again. She informed me of her flight arrival time, her breakfast preferences, her need for scheduled naps, and most importantly—she was not to see any evidence of any animals *ANYWHERE!!!* She claims that she is allergic to pets, and that they make her utterly miserable (in that case, she is also allergic to human beings, small chil-

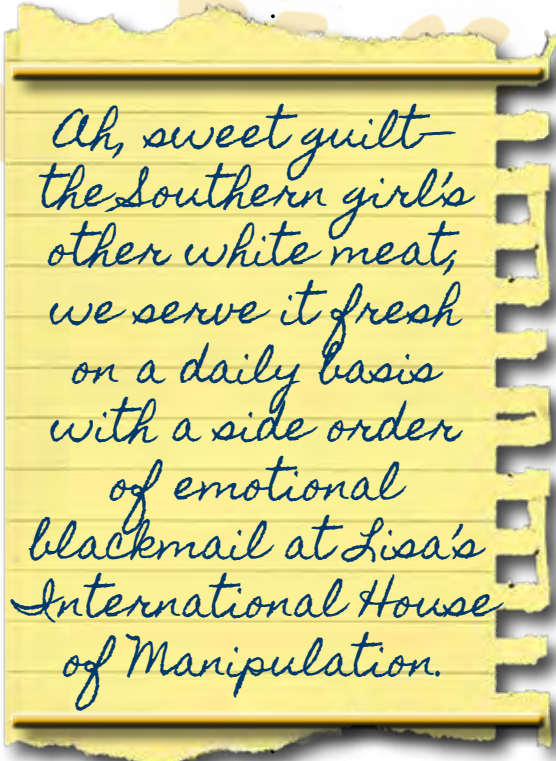
dren, babies and all festive occasions)!

Now, Sandra, I love my little Scottish Terrier as if he's my own baby. Heck, I can quick draw my picture-laden cell phone out as fast as any proud parent and force unsuspecting strangers to view photos of Buddy! He is such a sweet, if not always bright, little spirit. No one was going to banish him from his own home. While my aunt continued to issue demands over the phone, I decided to crate Buddy the weekend of her visit. How hard could that be? After all, he is 13 years old now and not as spry as he used to be. *Hold that thought.*

Immediately upon hanging up the phone, I began making the phone calls that would set this “*Operation Birthday Fiasco*” into motion. Aunt Myrtie wanted to go to Longhorn's for her birthday, so I called ahead and made sure they could accommodate a party of 17 or so on Saturday night. *No problem!* Then I called all of MY family to try to cobble together this party of about 17 or so. Sandra, you will never know the favors I called in for this birthday gathering. *Honey, Jimmy Hoffa negotiating with Teamsters had nothing on me that night.*

I cajoled, I threatened, I bribed and I cried. However, I did it—I guilted everyone into meeting at my house on Saturday afternoon around 5:00. *Ah, sweet guilt—the Southern girl's other white meat; we serve it fresh on a daily basis with a side order of emotional blackmail at Lisa's International House of Manipulation* (gratuities not expected but always appreciated).

Aunt Myrtie's flight arrived Saturday morning, and I was positively determined to make the best of it—you know me—*always the glass half-full kinda gal!* The ride home was an absolute delight (*yeah, I giggled as I typed that*). Turns out that ALL of her grandchildren are ungrateful and lazy, Atlanta is filthy and crime-ridden, and



*Ah, sweet guilt—the Southern girl's other white meat, we serve it fresh on a daily basis with a side order of emotional blackmail at Lisa's International House of Manipulation.*

what in the world was I thinking when I had my hair done? *Oh yeah, were we having fun yet?* I made a game of trying to decide which one of her eyes to look into while she harangued me (did I mention her lazy eye? No? Well, sometimes I gaze into her left eye and then later I follow the right eye to see where it leads me. I developed this little “eye game” when I was just a kid in a vain attempt to calm my nerves whenever she looked at me—with her left eye, no, her right eye, no, her left eye...*well you get the picture*).

Ah, sweet relief as we pulled into my driveway. I got her squared away in the guest room (which was too hot by the way—but you could have seen that one coming couldn't ya?). Aunt Myrtie, worn out from the flight (and from complaining about said flight), decided to take her scheduled nap a little earlier than usual. *Thank you, Lord.* I got her settled into bed and tiptoed out, leaving her door cracked open just a smidge. I then quietly gave Buddy a drink of water, patting his sad little head before quickly re-crating him in my master bedroom closet. Poor boy! While my aunt napped, I went back downstairs to unload the car.

Sandra, Honey, the back of my SUV was packed tighter than the Joad family's truck heading to California in the “Grapes of Wrath;” if I hadn't known her return flight was scheduled for Monday morning, I would have sworn she was moving in. *Shivers!* I kept marching in and out the front door—over and over again dropping her suitcases, one after the other, onto the foyer floor. As I made my way out the front door for what I hoped would be the last load, I was almost knocked off my feet by a furry four-legged beast going a mile a minute down my foyer staircase! *What in the world???* Frozen for half a second, I felt like one of the characters in the Lone Ranger asking, “Who was that masked

man?” *BUT I KNEW who this was—it was a crazed crate escapee—BUDDY!!!* Out the front door, the little demon dog sped past me.

He made a beeline across the street to my neighbor's front yard. Buddy stopped his mad dash only long enough to start pawing at the ground. I thought surely I could catch him then, but as I neared him, he took off again. At this point, I could see that he had a death grip on something in his mouth. *What in the world was it?* I didn't have time to speculate, 'cause off he ran again. This went on for about 15 minutes—the more I chased, the more he seemed to

enjoy this game of *Cat and Mouse*. Sandra, I kid you not; he actually looked over his shoulder at me in mid-run and smiled! *I will not be mocked, devil dog!*

Neighbors then joined me at this point in an attempt to help me capture the fugitive dog. I kept thinking to myself, “Just wait till I get you home”—'cause *I certainly wasn't going to strangle him in front of all these witnesses.* As we inched up on him, circling from all sides, he dropped to the ground and started furiously digging—trying to hide his precious booty. Distracted for a second, he let his guard down and I

leaped in for the kill—oops, *I mean the capture.* GOT HIM! I thanked everyone profusely for their help as I tightened my hold on the squirming ball of fur in my arms.

Before I turned to head back home, I looked down to where he was burying his treasure. *What was so important that Buddy had moved with more speed and agility in the past few minutes than he had in the past 10 years combined?* I bent down and shoveled at the dirt with my fingers. *YOU. HAVE. GOT. TO. BE. KIDDING. ME!!!*

As Katherine Turner so eloquently put it in “War of the Roses,” “*What fresh hell is this?*” I am aghast. Peeking through the dirt, some *THING*

*But I knew  
who this was –  
it was a crazed  
crate escapee –  
Buddy!!! Out the  
front door,  
the little demon  
dog sped past me.*



was smiling back up at me! *TEETH?* Yes, *TEETH!* Uppers, if I was not mistaken. *Uppers covered in mud and dog slobber.* Horrified, I used my thumb and index finger to scoop the teeth up; appalled, I carried them, along with the denture bandit, back home. Yuck, Yuck, Yuck! My mind was numb with yuckiness.

I couldn't quite wrap my addled brain around what had just happened; a little detective work was in order. Doing my best *Peter Falk as Columbo* imitation, I headed up the stairs and observed that the guest room door was wide open and a tell-tale trail of water led me to the bed where Aunt Myrtie still slept. An overturned denture container and a mateless lower denture mocked me from the side table—that's all the evidence I needed to prove that the slobber ridden denture in my hand that Buddy had been virtually wearing for the past half hour was indeed Aunt Myrtie's teeth. Swell.

What was I to do? I am scared to death of this woman on my best day! How was I to broach my aunt with Buddy's doggy tale involving this little denture adventure? After mulling it over, I hit upon a sound plan. *DON'T TELL HER A THING!* Sandra, am I bad? Don't answer that—it was a rhetorical question. Going with the Southern Theory of "what ya don't know can't hurt ya," I took her dentures into my bathroom and examined them more closely; they weren't broken or damaged as far as I could tell—just nasty. Let the disinfecting process begin. First, I did an initial rinse off of mud and doggie slobber; I then proceeded to pour an entire bottle of Listerine over the teeth. Still not certain that they were sufficiently doggie germ free, I pondered the contents of the cabinet under my sink. Uhhmmm. Comet? Well, it does clean and disinfect porcelain sinks, and dentures are made of porcelain, right? I sprinkled those babies till they were saturated in a green powder coating,

then scrubbed them and rinsed them till they sparkled like Grandma's finest china.

Sandra, when I saw my pitiful reflection in the bathroom mirror, haggard and sweaty, brushing my aunt's teeth (so to speak), two thoughts occurred simultaneously. One, the next dog crate I buy will have a combination lock, an electric fence and a guard in a sniper tower watching over it. Let Buddy try to Houdini himself out of that cage! Secondly, this was the exact moment I started flirting with the idea of drinking—and drinking a lot! Not becoming a raging alcoholic, mind

you, just drinking enough to qualify it as hobby—perhaps, like needlepoint. I decided to Google some sweet-sounding drink names—like Mississippi Mudslide—the second I was finished with my denture ministrations!

After I was positive that all traces of Buddy spit had been removed from Aunt Myrtie's uppers, I refilled her little denture holder with water and replaced the dentures, ever so

gingerly tip toeing into her room to return the container to her bedside table. Whew, now all I had to decide was where exactly to bury Buddy—oops, he wasn't dead...yet. I decided to put off strangling him, since I needed to get ready for the events of the evening and maybe even brush my own teeth for Heaven's sake.

Five o'clock finally arrived (it's always five o'clock somewhere, right? *Where is my drink?*). My family did me proud by actually showing up. As I welcomed them with a smile solidly frozen into place, my insides churned with fear. Would Aunt Myrtie know something had happened to her teeth? Sure, I had placed them back exactly as they had been before her nap, but it just seems that a person should possess some kind of sixth sense alerting them to the fact that their teeth might have been in a dog's mouth. Just sayin'...



An hour after everyone arrived, Aunt Myrtie descended the stairs like a Queen greeting her subjects—with indifference and a touch of disdain. She muttered a curt “We’re going to be late,” and sailed right past us as she headed out the door. It would appear that everything was completely back to normal and a crisis had been averted. Now to get this dinner over with.

First of all there was 17 of us, and although Longhorn’s was very gracious and accommodating, that still meant that we would need to take several cars to get to the restaurant. That’s right, we would be moving in a convoy! As you can imagine, we all fought over who got to ride with Aunt Myrtie—*right*.

Everyone piled into cars left and right, and finally our little Birthday Parade made its way into town to Longhorn’s. I really don’t remember much about the actual dinner—selective amnesia probably—but I believe it was pleasant enough. After the events of the day, I made a conscious effort to take a back seat and give the rest of my family the opportunity to “enjoy” Aunt Myrtie’s company. As they say, “Misery loves company.” Honey, in our family, Misery doesn’t just love company; heck no, we embrace Misery with open arms and ensconce it in our guest room!

During dinner, I do faintly recall Aunt Myrtie mentioning that her steak tasted like soap. Thinking fast, I piped in that my Salmon tasted a tad soapy as well. Sorry to throw you under the bus, Longhorn’s, *but it was either you or me*. As we finished our meal, Aunt Myrtie grew uncharacteristically sentimental and thanked us for helping her celebrate her birthday. She almost cracked a smile—and all I could think was that her teeth had never been so bright and shiny! Kudos to Comet and dinner is done!

On the drive back home, I could almost smell

the finish line. Getting through the rest of this night was gonna be a piece of cake, I smiled to myself. Granted, this morning had started badly at the airport with my aunt’s crabbiness, and thanks to Buddy, the day had escalated into an exercise in supreme torture, but now it was coming to a close with birthday cake and ice cream; a rather sweet way to end a rather bittersweet day.

Since I was driving the first car in our return convoy from the restaurant, I quickly pulled into the driveway rushing into the house ahead of everyone to set out the cake and light the candles.

I went back to the front door to let the other 15 file in while I handed out the birthday horns and balloons. Uh, yeah, you read that right—the *other 15*.

So, my dear Sandra, it was at that moment as I stood there in the foyer,

when I did my mental accounting:

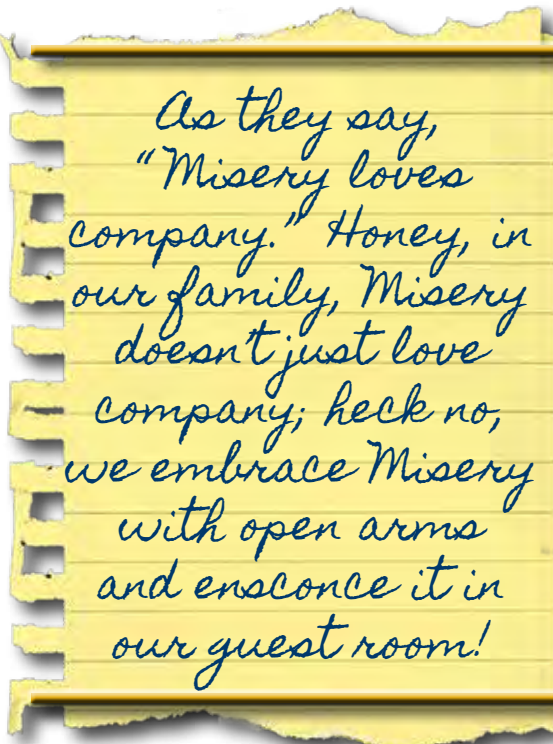
- *Birthday cake and ice cream: \$32.00*
- *Dinner for seventeen at Longhorn’s: \$425.17*
- *Leaving your aunt alone in the lobby at Longhorn’s on her 85th birthday ‘cause everyone of us thought she was riding with one of the other relatives in their car: PRICELESS!*

And though, at that point, it was sheer bedlam in our house as to who was at fault and how it could be fixed, I stole a quick glimpse at Buddy in his armored crate in the corner. Through the bars, he winked and shot me a sly little grin.

Love,  
*Lisa*



**Lisa Love** is a talented and insightful writer with a skewed sense of humor; she looks for—and often finds—the absurd masquerading as the mundane.





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# Mud Island Monorail

By Niles Reddick

**P**oplar Avenue dead-ended at Front Street in Memphis, and the parking lot was the last concrete to be seen before the mighty Mississippi.

After paying the six-dollar fee, we parked, walked in to the visitor center, and purchased tickets to Mud Island. We took the escalator up to the third floor to board the monorail, rather than walk the enclosed bridge above the monorail. The red monorail reminded me of the one at Disney, moving quickly across land and above a portion of the river to Mud Island, a river park with a first class museum, where tourists learn the history of the river—the battles fought, the ecological life, the influence on culture from blues and rock and roll to great literature.

As I glanced out the window, I noted that, once the monorail left the concrete boarding station, there didn't seem to be any tracks. My heart thumped, and I turned to the guide and asked if it was suspended.

"Nah. Goes right out there," she said.

"Yes," I said. "But where is the track?"

She pointed up, and I looked out the window about the time the doors closed with a swoosh and locked tight. I sat down and gripped the metal pole, my hands sliding because of sweat. "Dear God," I muttered. It would not be the first time I was to pray that day. I felt dizzy, sick to my stomach, and looked only at the floor, taking deep breaths. It only took a few minutes before it stopped, and the doors opened.

"You okay?" my wife asked.

*As I glanced  
out the window,  
I noted that once  
the monorail left  
the concrete  
boarding station,  
there didn't seem  
to be any tracks.*





"Of course, I am. Just tired."

"Well, I'm surprised you rode this. We're pretty high up, and I know you don't like heights."

"It doesn't seem high up; maybe only three or four stories, but it's just hanging there, suspended, like a zip line. Not like the one at Disney World or even the Marta in Atlanta."

She laughed. "Come on."

After enjoying the museum and taking photos of great river vistas, the metal "M" over the I-40 bridge between Arkansas and Tennessee, and tug boats and barges, we walked the scale model of the river, complete with running water that was clear and cold, not like the muddy Mississippi. We were impressed with the signage built into the model describing cities and towns along the river and offering tidbits of interesting information. I noted a school teacher with a group of students scribbling notes on a pad. When we removed our shoes to dip our feet into the cool waters, I pointed her way and said, "Those poor kids are gonna have a quiz and they aren't paying attention at all." We both laughed.

After a couple of hours, we decided to go and find the Peabody Hotel, check in to our room, watch the infamous duck march, visit Elvis' house, and enjoy some blues and barbecue on Beale Street. I didn't feel comfortable riding the monorail back and told my wife maybe we should just walk back. If the monorail had been supported by a bridge or tracks, I might have felt a tiny bit better.

"Oh, come on; it'll be fine. Plus, I'm getting

tired and would prefer not to walk any more than we already have."

"Okay," I agreed.

On the monorail, there was an elderly couple, a mother and two children, and an employee I remembered from the gift shop who must have finished her shift. The doors closed—again with a swoosh—and locked tight. As the monorail left the concrete deck, there was a slight dip, followed by a loud pop, a boing-boing sound. I gripped the pole, and

then watched a portion of the car come unattached and move downward, dangling. Our portion was still connected, but I felt it was a matter of time before it plummeted into the mighty Mississippi River below, a river that runs two thousand plus miles across ten states and has taken countless lives and become the final resting place for many as a result of flooding, accidental drowning, suicide, and even murder.

"Everyone move to this end," I yelled, and amid

the sudden crying and praying, they listened. I had already called 911 on my cell and explained to the dispatcher our grim situation. Apparently, there were other calls, too, from high rise offices with a view of the monorail and river, from relatives of passengers who had received texts, from people driving down Front Street who glanced sideways, from lucky people who didn't make this ride and were waiting on the next; they would all, fortunately, walk the bridge.

"Sir, is everyone inside the monorail all right?"

"I think so. Just scared."

*As the monorail left the concrete deck, there was a slight dip, followed by a loud pop, a boing-boing sound.*



"Help is on the way," she said. I didn't, however, feel reassured how a midair rescue might take place with the monorail dangling over a portion of the Mississippi, and between rapid fire thoughts in my mind, I, too, prayed.

The guide did not have life preservers and didn't know what to do. She kept texting and wiping tears. A flurry of onlookers over at Mud Island and then back at Front Street gathered, cupping hands to block the sun, so they could watch our disaster unfold. I kept looking in both directions for a boat that would throw out a self-inflating raft, but the only thing I saw were firemen, police officers, and emergency medical technicians running on the bridge above the monorail system that seemed to create a slight vibration I didn't think was good for our situation. Next, ropes and climbers' gear were lowered and instructions were yelled through a bullhorn with a directive: "Women and children first."

Since the doors would not open, I busted out the window with a metal fire extinguisher. I was glad it didn't explode. It was large enough to get everyone through without discomfort. The mother and her two children were first, followed by my wife and the elderly woman. The guide and gift shop worker were next.

The elderly man said, "Son, I just don't know if I can do this. I didn't want to ride this blasted thing to begin with."

"Me neither," I said. "This thing's not going to hold much longer. Let's just do it."

He nodded, and I hooked him up, pushed him out and they pulled him up. As I hooked

myself up and shoved off, the monorail crashed into the river below, and I hung there a moment, like a catfish on a line a fisherman had yet to reel, hearing screams, followed by, "I think we've got him." I was pulled to the bridge. I didn't want to stand. I wanted to stay curled in a fetal position on the concrete and cry, but I wondered if the accident might have been the result of a trimmer from the New Madrid seismic zone and I wanted off the bridge, too.

"You okay?" my wife asked.

"I told you we shouldn't have ridden that thing."

"Well, we won't next time."

"There won't be a next time."

In the hustle and bustle after, that included kids telling their dad via cell how cool it all was, the elderly couple calling their adult children and reassuring them before it made the nightly news, I forgot to thank the rescue workers for helping and thought I would send an email later. All

I wanted was to get into my room at the Peabody, take a shower, and sleep. I didn't care about the Peabody ducks, Elvis, barbecue on Beale Street, or the blues.



**Niles Reddick** lives in Jackson, Tennessee with his wife and two children. His latest book is "Drifting Too Far From the Shore," and it is available on Amazon.com and in iBooks. For more information on the author, visit his website at [www.nilesreddick.com](http://www.nilesreddick.com).

*I didn't, however,  
feel reassured  
how a midair  
rescue might  
take place with  
the monorail  
dangling over  
a portion of the  
Mississippi*

## The Dating Tip

By Marshall Lancaster

D

ating had been a sore subject for me in high school in the 1980's. It always seemed that the more interest that I showed in a young lady whom I dated, the greater the potential for the relationship to end out of her fear of commitment.

Most of the relationships in which I was a party lasted several months, many of them ending in the proverbial *let's-see-other-people* sales pitch. Ostensibly, this was supposed to mean that, technically, I was still in the picture. In reality, though, these words were always a bait and switch—the words of someone seeking a better offer elsewhere, truly leaving me behind like chopped liver.

The promise of college was supposed to change all of this. After all, in college, particularly at a big state school, the eligible girls were charming, sweet, and abundant. In my opening weeks of undergraduate school, I savored the opportunities presented to me as a young man in a thriving dating scene—or so I thought. My roommate, a year older than myself, saw to it that we attended every party, Greek-sponsored, all-campus, dorm, apartment, or otherwise. Surely, my dating net would be cast wide; dating was, after all, a numbers game, and the odds were smiling down upon me.

The opening months, however, yielded an *all-quiet* on the dating front. I met numerous girls, many of whom I would bump into in my classes, in the hallways, or even between classes. Dating rarely materialized. My roommate chalked it up to my lowly status as freshman. He even said that the whole year could turn out like this, a drought. I decided that I would go home one weekend and just hang out with my parents in Littleton, North Carolina. They, of course, wanted to get the lowdown on college, particularly the academic side of things. Sometimes, I would entertain questions like “Are you meeting any nice girls?” I was sadly speechless when

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I thought.



# Guest Check

SERVER	TABLE	GUESTS	CHECK NUMBER
			905801

Dear  
Marshall...  
[over]



Thank You

TAX TOTAL

the subject was broached.

"How are the girls?" my father would ask.

"They are okay, I guess," I would respond dejectedly.

At the end of a great weekend of Mom's home-cooked meals, clean clothes, and the best home-baked cookies, I prepared to make my trip back to Chapel Hill. Mom had mentioned the possibility that friends of hers, farmers from our area, might like to make this journey to Chapel Hill with us. These friends had never been on the campus and wanted to take a look around. It was a Sunday night in the winter time, and there would not be much to see at night, but they were up for the trip anyway. Suddenly, we actually had two vehicles of travelers headed to my dorm room. Sadly, they would miss out on the more scenic aspects of the campus. I was feeling great with them around, and sour thoughts about dating were the last thing on my mind.

It had been decided prior to the trip that we would stop at one of the exits off 15-501, between Durham and Chapel Hill, and have a Sunday dinner at Honey's, a country-themed restaurant thriving just prior to the arrival of Cracker Barrel. Honey's specialized in breakfast for dinner. You could get hotcakes, scrambled eggs, omelettes, and the best coffee in the area. You could also have the traditional hamburger, meatloaf, or spaghetti if you pleased. A safe bet was always the hamburger steak with gravy and mashed potatoes. As we walked in the door and were seated, a cloud of cigarette smoke pushed its way up to the ceiling fan. The place was packed for a Sunday night. I could tell by his sneaky grin that Alan—a friend of my parents—was winding up his wit. The hostess said that our waitress would be arriving soon. Then she appeared—a

tall strawberry blonde with great manners and a charming smile. I had my sights set on the western omelette with toast and coffee. Alan ordered and then decided he would put me in the spotlight without my giving him the go-ahead. Alan's wife, a perpetual jokester named Anne, giggled as Alan began to test the waters.

"So, Marshall, have you started dating anyone yet in Chapel Hill? I hear there are more girls than guys; 3 to 1, they say. That'll make it easy for you. You should meet you a nice girl in the dorm," Alan teased me, grinning as he attempted to get under my skin.

"There is no way I could last as a student there," he joked. I kind of knew where he was going with that comment. Getting Alan out of town was not too terribly difficult, but once you did you never knew what might ensue. You were rolling the dice.

"So far everything is pretty quiet. I have met a number of girls, but coursework tends to keep me busy. I have four years, so I am going to play it by ear and sight, I guess," I woefully replied.

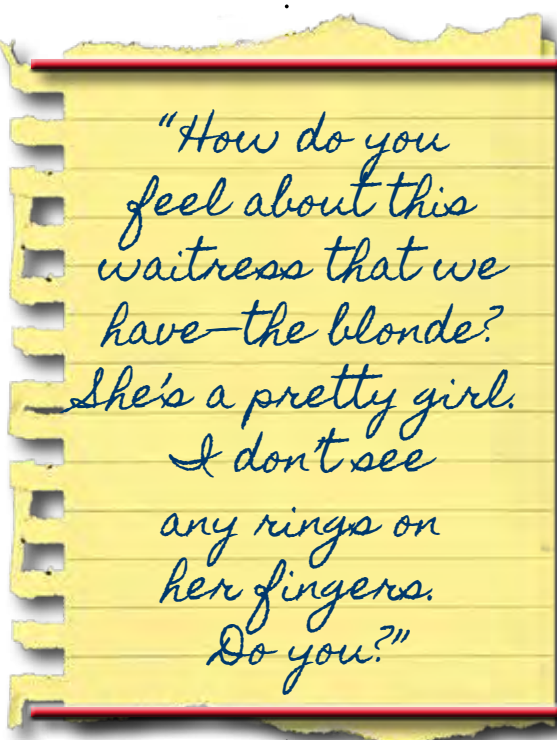
"How do you feel about this waitress that we have—the blonde? She's a pretty

girl. I don't see any rings on her fingers. Do you? Why don't you put one on them?" Alan questioned.

I told him that I had certainly noticed the charms of our polite waitress as she frequently came to our table, recommended certain dishes to some, refilled our beverages, and just exuded a certain warmth not found in your average waitress.

That dusty old jukebox near the restaurant entrance belted out an old Ronnie Milsap classic, "Any Day Now."

Out of nowhere, Alan began motioning for our waitress to come to the table. I became immediately embarrassed, turning a deep shade of red.





I had a feeling this would not be about food! With the biggest grin on his face, he began playing his very own countrified version of Cupid, saying, “Hey! Do you like him? He’s a good old boy! His parents are the nicest people I have ever met.” He was quite a spectacle. Can you imagine Cupid with cowboy boots and an unusually gregarious pat on the back—mine or anybody’s? It was his way of communicating.

“Come here. Come here. You need to meet someone. I want to introduce you to Marshall. He is a freshman at Chapel Hill—studying medicine (that too would pass). Even though he just saw you, he would like to ask you out on a date, maybe to the movies or even to get some dinner one night,” Alan boldly stalled her for conversation as she tried to get back to work.

My face turned as red as a beet—mortified I was. Suddenly, I realized that I could play this chance encounter one of two ways: (1) *I could follow up on the lead established by Alan (What was there to lose?), or,* (2) *on the other hand, I could go into deep denial (Alan, I don’t know what you are talking about?).*

The denial would go something like this: “I said nothing of the kind. I am actually just enjoying my coffee.”

Betsy, our waitress, surprisingly launched into spirited conversation, happy someone had noticed her charms.

“I go to Chapel Hill, too. I am a double major in Psychology and English. I am just working weekends to help meet expenses. It helps me relate to people, too. I could write a book about the people I meet here—some real characters. You wouldn’t believe it,” she said with a big smile.

We all must be careful not to read too much into big smiles. I introduced myself, mentioned my dorm and intended major, and finished

off the omelette. For a couple of minutes, I did ponder the strong likelihood that I would never see Betsy again. The smile, the charm, the personality were all things that I wanted in a potential girlfriend. My family members finished their meals and some got a refill on coffee while I sat there contemplating the romantic possibilities. She surely had been nice to us.

Meals eaten and tips paid, we stood up and proceeded to leave. I had to be back at the dorm, and they had at least a two-hour drive back home to Littleton.

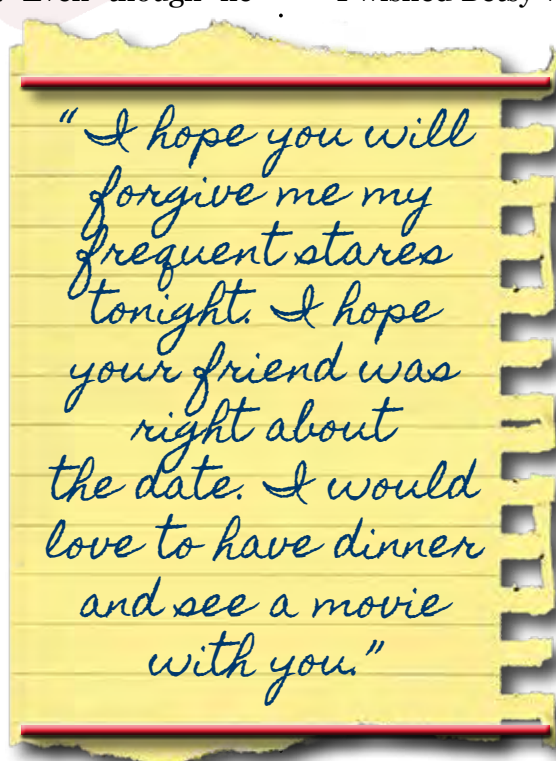
I wished Betsy well and headed for the backseat of our family car. There would likely be no date, so it would not be wise to revisit any of Alan’s ridiculous nonsense.

“Good luck at school,” I remember Betsy saying.

“Wait. How much did they charge us for the banana pudding?” Mom queried, looking at the check.

To her great surprise, Mom had also discovered a note scribbled in ink on the check! This was the transcript of those joyous words:

*Dear Marshall,*  
*I hope you will forgive me my frequent stares tonight. I hope your friend was right about the date. I would love to have dinner and see a movie with you. There’s a cool drive-in between Durham and Chapel Hill. There is also an amazing Italian place down the road from Honey’s. It’s called Anna’s. They have the best linguini and white clam sauce. No pressure, but how does Saturday night sound? I have that night off this week. I live in Hinton James, the south campus dorm behind yours. Give me a call soon to set up the details.*  
*Best,*  
*Betsy*  
*P.S. Your friend was a real hoot. Do you always let your friends do your talking? Just kidding!*



Ecstatic, I thanked Alan profusely. It did appear that my sluggish start in the dating scene was about to be remedied. I tried not to let it swell my head, though. So far, college had taught me a lot of humility. I wished my family members a safe trip back home, thanked them for dinner, and sent them home with a big, confident smile on my face. I was about to crack the dating code.

It was only 9:30 pm, so I figured I would show my serious interest to Betsy by calling her. I realized, though, that a call too soon might suggest a certain desperation.

We did have to work out the details of the date for Saturday, which was only six days away. I dialed up the number, and this was the response I got:

“Marshall? Thank you for calling. I just got off from work. I hope you had a chance to think about Saturday night (*I had*). You can meet me in the lobby of my dorm if that works (*That works!*).”

This was an amazing feeling.

The conversation, if you could call it that, was really going where I wanted it to go, that is, until I heard uncontrollable laughter—a cacophony of guffaws that overpowered Betsy’s voice on the phone.

It was like a punch to the belly out of nowhere. I couldn’t quite make out the voice I heard. It was certainly male, but even Betsy herself had gotten lost in a fit of laughter. Boy, was I confused.

Finally, Alan took the phone from his wife, Anne—who had been absorbing our whole exchange with Betsy—and he painfully broke the news to me that I had been *had* in the

biggest way possible.

He proceeded to tell me that Anne and he rigged the whole thing. She had written the letter; she had also been “Betsy” on the phone. I had to confess that it had been a good one; I had never quite been fooled like that—yet another romantic misadventure.

I thank my lucky stars as I reflect, thirty years later, on the event that, fortunately, would not come to define my life. I was fortunate enough to marry a wonderful woman who is a mother to our two amazing daughters.

Prospects were not always so great, however.

I am grateful for whatever forks in the road have brought me to my wife. Robert Frost was right about everything.

I never take anything for granted—love, family, or meals. On occasion I do think about that Sunday night of thirty years ago.

Whenever I dine with my friends, I see the check, and I am convinced that I could easily write a letter to lighten the mood a bit.

I mean I could really add some zest to the most boring of meals. Boy, I could really delve into the world of matchmaking.

However, I have never brought myself to write such a letter. I would not want to toy with anyone’s emotions for the sake of a couple of good laughs. Not everyone is lighthearted about these things.



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

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# Welcome Home, Brownie

## (What They Told Me)

By Charlton Walters Hillis



Bluegrass stages are littered with the corpses of old men: if not corpses, then near corpses, and ghosts. Think bluegrass and you think of Bill Monroe, Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, the Louvin brothers, Roy Acuff.

The ones on local stages in numerous small towns and back-roads places are just not as talented; others, just not as lucky. Old men all the same. There are the younger men, and the young women, strikingly attractive, some of them, who cause old men like Brownie to straighten and to begin making awkward jokes intended as compliments, and there are children even, from time to time. Still, bluegrass is the music of old men. And where are the old women? They're out there in the audience, or they're home in bed waiting for the old men to return and warm them.

Two old women up there on the stage now, and the old man to their right and the old man to their left are nothing, nothing at all. The old men are no more than the very microphones, or the walls. We have heard their stories and are tired of them. But two old women now, playing bluegrass—*that's remarkable*.

Their hair has been colored, and they are elderly, slow moving. In but a short time they will be in the nursing home, if indeed they are not only out on leave tonight.

One plays the fiddle and sings; the other plays the mandolin. The fiddle player has her hair permed (not professionally, but no matter) and the color of an unripe lemon. She is tall, large boned with a long neck. Her face, high, cold, proud, her features, sharp and fine, the face of a wealthy horsewoman at the Derby, the face of an aging princess in an eighteenth century European novel. She wears a white sweater with a high neck, a simple necklace over it, and a calf-length, colorful floral print skirt. Sturdy shoes. Her voice is no longer strong,

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they're home in bed  
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warm them.*







but it is sure. Her face, her manners, are somewhat strained, as if she has never fully relaxed on stage.

Her sister's hair is colored dark and is painfully crimped; her face is white, slightly smiling, eyes twinkling. She is not as tall as the other, and her back is a little bowed. She wears a floral print dress in shades of blue and gray. Sturdy shoes. She must have learned the mandolin as a child at her grandfather's knee, the grandfather, a master, of course, who so instilled in her a love of the music that she never attempted another instrument but gave it her all.

When the emcee walks over and turns her microphone nearer the mandolin and whispers a request that she play a piece of a song alone, she seems afraid. Her solo brings so much applause from the audience that she blushes. She does not know her own worth. She would be the old maid school teacher. What on earth are they doing up there—*no—Where else in the world are they more suited to be?*

These two tonight have not buried the talent that keeps them climbing the steps up to the stage—who knows, perhaps still reaching for stardom of some sort, totally unrealistic now, but something to keep them going. Or maybe they play in church every Sunday, in between these same old men and the younger woman, and this is just a crumb they are throwing our way, out of nothing else to do on a Friday evening.

I could have gone on speculating a long time, imagining them as Derby princesses or old maid schoolteachers or whatever else came

to mind, but the truth is, I simply ran into one of them in the backstage restroom one night. It was located literally backstage at the Depot; one had to walk up on to the stage and then behind the performers and on back to the restroom.

The line was just long enough for my being able to hear the story. Oh, not in one night's waiting line; it began then and evolved, with my sometimes finding myself seated next to one or both of them before the show started. They were not always up to performing. They, but mostly it was the fiddle player told me the truth, and as you will see, it was not her story, or their story; it was that old man's story. No matter how I tried to find it otherwise, that was what it boiled down to, that old man's story. They sang and played, all right, but all she had to tell me after a lifetime was that old man's story. But, *that's the way o' the world*, as he, Brownie, was reported to be fond of saying.

"My husband, Brownie used to sing that same song, right over there," she pointed to the backs of a band. That was the first thing she ever said to me, but what song it was they were playing, I've long forgotten.

## The Fiddle Player

*Seems I've spent a lifetime moving*, she said another time, *even though I'm a long time settled down*. We knew U-Hauls well, Brownie and me. Every time we saw one going down the road, Brownie'd say, "There goes another pore soul, starved out. There goes a trailer load of *Precious Memories*." It got to be a joke with us, that *Precious Memories* thing. That

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comes from an old gospel song, you know, but many's the time it was no joke. We did know well the feeling of loading up all you own in the world in one of those trucks—*all you own, including memories*—and setting off down the road to who knows what. You don't dare look back.

By the time we got settled to the point we hadn't rented a U-Haul in five years at least and could breathe a little easier, we looked around and realized we had begun to grow roots like normal people, and it was right back here in Tennessee.

Funny how when you're young and on the move, you've got a lofty idea of someday settling in some exotic place. Then before you know it, you're there, and you find out it's just where you came from.

We were up in Kentucky for a while, lived there the longest, and if there's one thing I remember about Kentucky, it's the hollers. Behind every town, or through every town, behind every row of houses, and behind every country house on every tobacco farm, there'll be a holler, just a low place at the bottom of a ridge, with sometimes a creek in it, but usually just a long, dry container provided by the Almighty for dumping trash. Where there's a hill, there's a holler, and not for nothing.

I said to Brownie, "What'll I do with it?" and he said to me, "Just wait till dark and throw it in the holler, like everybody else in Kentucky." If I had a dime for every time he said that.

I have already told you that Brownie was a country singer, but not in the usual way. He wouldn't give you a dime for Conway Twitty;

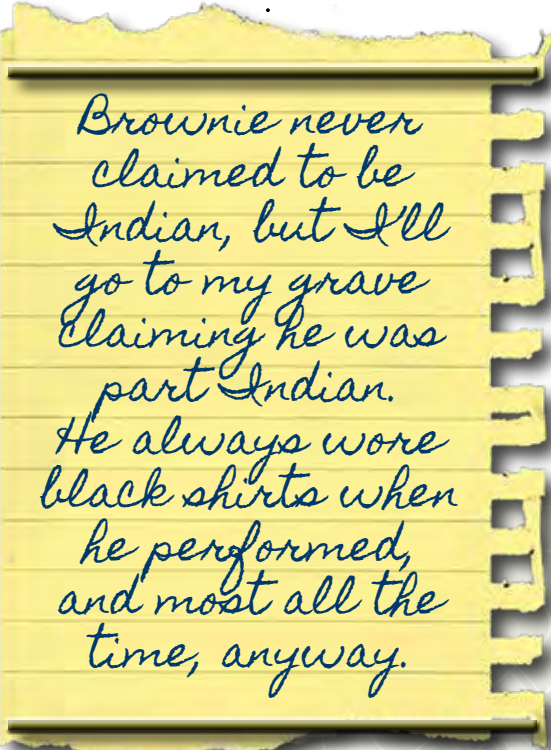
all he was interested in was Jimmie Rodgers. Sometimes I think that Brownie Sullivan was Jimmie Rodgers, especially since all the talk shows and books out lately about reincarnation, people coming back in another life and all, you know. Now Brownie was nine years older than me. He was small and kind of stooped from stooping over that guitar so many years. I always thought he looked like little Jimmy Dickens when he was young. His hair and his eyes were like night. Brownie never claimed to be Indian, but I'll go to my grave claiming he was part Indian.

He always wore black shirts when he performed, and most all the time, anyway. This was his act: he sat instead of stood, sat on an old oak stool he carried in the trunk of that old green Plymouth, and he did Jimmie Rodgers' songs; he sang, played, and yodeled just exactly like Jimmie Rodgers, himself. People loved it. He won awards, and he made a little money now and then, but he'd still

drive half the night sometimes to play for some little place that didn't pay at all, knowing in advance they didn't pay...for people who couldn't help him.

Now he did some other old songs too, and he was good. He was good—*he was really good*—at bluegrass gospel. And he could have done the new songs just as well, but he was one stubborn man, and he sang what he liked best. He was humble like, and people liked that.

He was good enough to go to Nashville, and I always tried to get him there. He could have made something of himself, you know. But you know what got in the way...it was his



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foolin' around with things...he spent so much time he didn't need to hanging out with local groups...and most of the time that meant gospel. He spent most of his time with people who couldn't help him.

He would stand in, help sing, play, whatever. When he should have been going to Nashville. I could always tell what he really loved best was gospel—at least second only to Jimmie Rodgers, and that's what got in his way.

It like to drove me crazy, watching all that and not being able to make something better happen.

You know, he never cracked a smile one when he was up there. He was serious as an old hound dog, as sad. There was nothing flashy about a Brownie Sullivan performance, just pure old music for the love of it. He would many times tell a bit of history before he sang a song, like where it came from, who wrote it, when and why. He knew all that stuff from reading, and from talking to old people even when he was young, knew all about why people acted the way they did. He always said, *"the way o' the world"*—he'd sum up just about anything with that.

I fell in love with him watching him for the first time, at a benefit, when I was seventeen. I went back afterward to get his autograph, just like he was famous, even though I knew he wasn't. That was the beginning and the end of it.

Now you might think being married to a country singer like that would have been a dream, but of course, like any man, Brownie could be stubborn, and not at all like he was

on stage. But we stayed together for forty-three years.

## The Mandolin Player

Once in a while, Brownie would stop between songs and tell a funny story, just to get a laugh out of his audience, but even then he never cracked a smile one. *Listen, this was one he told:*

There used to be a sheriff around these parts, name of Silas Axton, owned a Ford dealership and was a long time in office. There was this family up near Spencer and one of them, old man Earl Battiest, was known, not for making moonshine—that was common—but for making good moonshine, and the sheriff was heard to say that he knew men would drink whiskey, and he preferred they drink good whiskey, so he left ol' Earl alone. He probably enjoyed some of it himself.

One day the federal men come in and insist, so he goes with them, but stops down below the Battiest house and refuses to go with them any further. They go on up and are met at the door by a girl. "Where's your Daddy?" one of these men asks her.

"He's off in the woods makin' whiskey," she says, bold as ever you see.

"Give you a dollar to show us the way."

"Ok, give it to me now."

"We'll give it to you after we get back."

"No, give it to me now."

"Why?"

"Cause if you go up there, you won't be comin' back."

Now, he told that like it was a joke, but I've been in that house, I knew that girl, Sue Ellen

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—*she was Brownie's cousin*—and I can just see her talkin to those federal men. She was Brownie's cousin and Silas, another cousin, there were a lot of them. Inside that house, the floor sagged, and the room, that whole house, looked just like it had been stuffed full from another house being emptied into it, things piled here, there, stacked into corners, every inch of space taken up with being a place for something, but for the walkway around the table in the center of the room, the table, too, full, and the walkway into the next room, the kitchen, open doorway, through which the same clutter could be seen, including a fifty-pound bag of dog food leaning against the refrigerator. In the front room, it was dark even on the brightest day, and on the walls—*wasn't I there with them often enough to memorize it all?*—a picture of Jesus, a smaller picture of some landscape, a calendar from the county extension office with that picture of those two cute little boys in overalls talking farming, you know the one...nothing much unusual at all about the whole house...and Silas Axton knew what Sue Ellen said to be true; that's part why he stayed down at the bottom, and part out of pure, stubborn loyalty to good whiskey. Sue Ellen later raised three boys in that very house on the side of a hill.

Why, I remember well one day watching her walk down the street, flipflops slapping the sidewalk, a babe in arms and two younguns running and screaming around her, headed for the square. On the town square, they were selling homemade candy, crafts, guns, knives, and flea market things, because it was

*Court Days*, held annually for three days in May. This is the glory of the town, the one big shindig, a leftover from the old days. Sue Ellen's a hefty size, taller than average, coarse-skinned, she dressed just recklessly—*she was real pretty when she was young*—but...

She stopped the sheriff in his tracks, at the knife booth, and asked him—*I couldn't hear from where I stood*—what was no doubt a personal or at least an uncalled-for question. That was her way, she would as soon approach the president of the United States as her own

brother in the flesh—it *made no difference to her*—to say whatever it was she had on her mind, and there was no telling what that might be, she had the strangest mind you ever saw. Tact, common courtesy, respect for position—*manners!*—all that meant nothing at all to her...but still she was family. Brownie's family ...and that little town up there was Brownie's town. And now, today—*did you know?*—the whole town's closed on Thursday, every Thursday.

Well, it was Sue Ellen got that inheritance. My sister thought Brownie would get it, Brownie, himself thought so for years, because he was raised by his grandparents, and they were going to leave that little place to him, and maybe he wouldn't have to work so hard. He always worked at that parts factory. But by the time his grandfather died, things were different—*he was different*. Or maybe he had always been that way, but it was hard to see, to accept, you know, because you just don't expect people to be that way...

That new road went right past the place, so it was worth a lot more than it had been

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before. And instead of trying to go to Nashville on that money, like my sister thought, and like she always thought Brownie should... well, he just seemed to not care about that, anymore. He got that inheritance, all right, but he signed it right over to Sue Ellen. He said she was raising three boys with no daddy around to help, and they needed it more than he did. Sorry sons they turned out to be, but you couldn't know that. First, he bought my sister a car, and then he gave Sue Ellen all the rest of that money. *Does anybody do that?* You know, I don't think my sister ever got over that. What he did was the kind of thing somebody should do, I guess, but it's just not what people do in real life, and I don't think she ever got over it. She won't talk about it.

## The Fiddle Player

They came to depend on Brownie up there on that mountain where we lived. I don't mean they depended on him to do *anything*. They depended on him to be there. I don't mean they depended on him to be there for them in times of trouble, *though he sometimes was*, but just to be there. Do you know what I mean? Not a man of them up there would call it love—*women would*—but that's what it was. The way I see it, after a certain amount of time, you either make people hate you, or you make them stone cold toward you, even while they're shaking your hand and giving you the time of day. In a case like that, they wouldn't miss you if you died, any more than they'd miss a telephone pole. Even though they'd go to the funeral and pretend. But some people, sometimes, make people depend on them with

the heart. That's love. There's no explaining it. And a few people have a way of making a whole lot of people depend on them with the heart. Someone else might have done a whole lot more for them, but they'll love this one while they won't the other. *Does that make sense?*

Now with Brownie, it was all tied up in talk. He talked people into loving him, I guess. He talked to everybody he met by chance like I talk to my closest relation on a good day. *Do you know?* He wasn't ever in too big a

hurry or bothered by any thought of it not being the right time or place or person to talk with...or if they were somebody worth talking to, who could help him! And if you talk enough, talking in that slow, drawn-out way he had that makes the other person do the same, with both of you airing your family linen before getting down to business—why, then, I guess it cancels out all the other things you never get around to doing. It's a trade off, you see. Over here you've got

a woman cooking to beat all—behind closed doors. When the casserole's done, it's delivered, the *thank-you's* are said, and back home she goes. Over there, you've got a man who might never get around to fixing what needs to be fixed for somebody, but he's got that same somebody's heart strings, mind you, all twisted up in his talk. After a little time passes and the casserole's eaten, which one of them is going to be remembered? Why, it'll be the talker with whom they swapped life stories and heartaches...*you've got to give him that.*

He was laid up in Knoxville for three months near the end. Now a lot of people sent cards,

*First, he bought my  
sister a car, and  
then he gave  
Sue Ellen all the  
rest of that money.  
Does anybody  
do that?*



and a few people drove down to visit him, but by and large, it was like we were on our own again, like we had done got another U-Haul and moved away. He had cancer, you know. When he passed, it was the first time I'd been back up there for the whole three months. My sister would bring me things, and I stayed with my aunt in Knoxville.

It was hot that summer, hotter than it had been in a long time, and I had spent that last three months in that air-conditioned hospital, hardly ever seeing the sun. It was funny, I wasn't ready for the sun, or for that mountain, you know, it looked old and new at the same time.

And then, there were the balloons! I sure wasn't ready for those balloons. Nothing like that had ever been done up there before. Flowers maybe, but not balloons. My head was whirling all the way up that mountain.

The sun was way too hot, I've already said that, and we were in this line of cars like a wagon train or something, winding slow like through the valley, and from the car—first time I ever noticed—the road looked lower than the fields on each side, like it had sunk over time. Every little bit, there was a car or a pickup, just frozen like on the side of the road. Like the rapture had already happened. Stopped dead still, parked crooked on the side of that little windy road, people still inside, though. And every now and then, one of them was standing outside the car, stiff, hat in hand, beside those red and yellow balloons. It just all hit me like a strange picture, something I wasn't really a part of. Now I've seen funeral processions all my life, and cars stopping for them—but all

*this was just like I was watching a movie.*

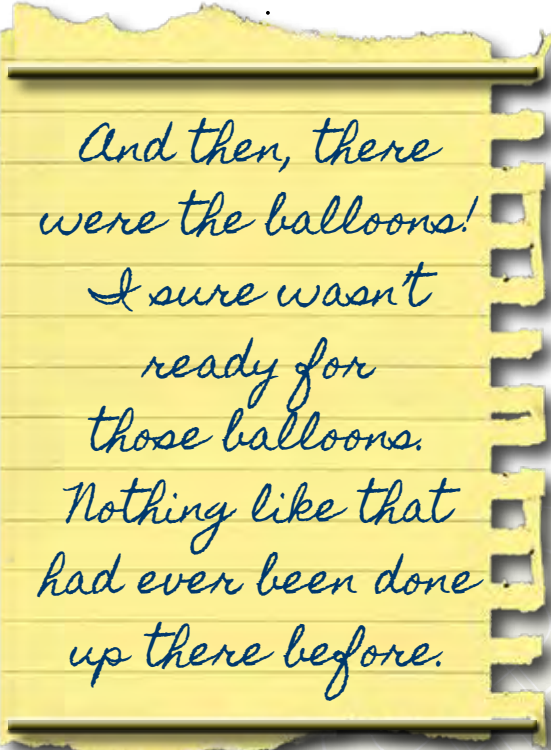
As you come over that mountain, that other mountain range is huge, like a solid blue wall out there in front, running north to south as far as you can see, and I always thought the valley looked like a green river with little white boat houses here and there. Looking back the way you came, you see that first mountain, the one you came over, not quite as big as the one in front. The bigger mountain is always ahead, that wall, and that tall yellow grass near the road...and that

hot sun, just too hot, and I thought that day the heat would shrink everything, including me. My eyes couldn't stay open for it, but just a bit, I was squinting so hard...but I go around Jerusalem to get to Jericho. What I was trying to tell you about was those balloons.

I'm telling you my eyes did open wide when I saw them. Little hand-made signs with red and yellow balloons, here and there, all along the way: "Welcome Home, Brownie," they said. At

the first one, I thought maybe it was just one sign, but no, up ahead there was another one: "Welcome Home, Brownie." And then another one, and another...going slow, *slow*, we kept going up that windy road, and I looked back.

There was that blue green valley, and that long line of cars. And in the one right behind us were those women, I forget their names, who played in a family band at the Depot. That older one, the mother, she was fat, and I couldn't tell, but figured she was wearing that same white blouse with puffed sleeves and black jumper, that she always wore on stage, and her two daughters in those red



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and rose and blue, shiny, satiny dresses of theirs, with heavy earrings, red lipstick, long hair, they were all kind of fat. My sister and I always said (*just between us*) they were tacky, the way they dressed. But could they sing! Tacky could be forgiven the minute they opened their mouths to sing. Tacky began to look good when they sang. But you know they were the kind that always seemed to be a little uppity about it. Haven't seen them up here in years.

And still, there were those pickups and cars, even on the curves. There had been road construction up there that had been stopped in its tracks for lack of funds. Huge jagged piles of dirt and rocks and cut trees, above the road. They looked like they might fall on us. And then I saw another bunch of red and yellow balloons on one of those parked Caterpillars! Now up on the flat top of the mountain, we went past that little store, and there was a "Welcome Home Brownie" sign right there on the front of it.

Then, we went on down that dirt road, and it was so dusty you couldn't see, and then, there was the sheriff in the middle of the road, standing out of the car with his lights flashing, standing there against the sun, looked like a statue. He was directing traffic.

And then the shade, finally, and those big old trees, old and tall, a little woods—and red cows over in the field—and it was so peaceful and green and shady, I remember feeling so relieved to be out of the sun, and remember thinking the place looked almost unreal. Oh, I'd been there before, of course, to more than one burying, but that day it looked like some-

thing out of a fairy tale, with those big old shade trees and all that green grass like a soft carpet. There was a tent near the middle. I thought there would be one last sign there or a big bunch of balloons, but there weren't any at all, and I was looking. I guessed it wouldn't be respectful in a graveyard.

The preacher was a dentist, this tall, thin man with a long red face and curly white hair. He had on a black suit with a yellow rosebud pinned to his lapel. Sometimes it was a red carnation he wore, but he almost always wore a flower on his suit. His people helped build that real old church building back up the road, he grew up around here and still preached on the mountain every Sunday until the day he died, and if I remember right, he died on a Sunday afternoon after he'd preached that morning.

Now that preacher, we all just called him Eddie, wore that flower to give away. Just about every service, after it was over, whether it was a funeral or just an ordinary Sunday morning, he would give away that little flower in his lapel to somebody, some lady or some child. He would choose. He would smile, and people would laugh about it, but it was an honor to be the one he gave it to, you know? It got to be a big thing. And that day I thought he ought to give it to me because I was the widow. Wouldn't you think? I thought of that, and then I thought it probably wouldn't happen, I'm used to being forgotten. Sometimes I think I must be invisible, I get ignored even when I'm standing right there in front of people.

It might sound bad to say this, but every

*The preacher was a dentist, this tall, thin man with a long red face and curly white hair. He had on a black suit with a yellow rosebud pinned to his lapel.*



one of those little handmade signs were for Brownie, not for me, and I was the widow. I was the one grieving, you know? Every one of those red and yellow balloons were for him, even though I was the one who worked myself red in the face cooking for them whenever there was a death or a sickness or a potluck. That little yellow rosebud would be a making up for all that, kind of, for all the times they'd ignored me, while they acted like Brownie hung the moon.

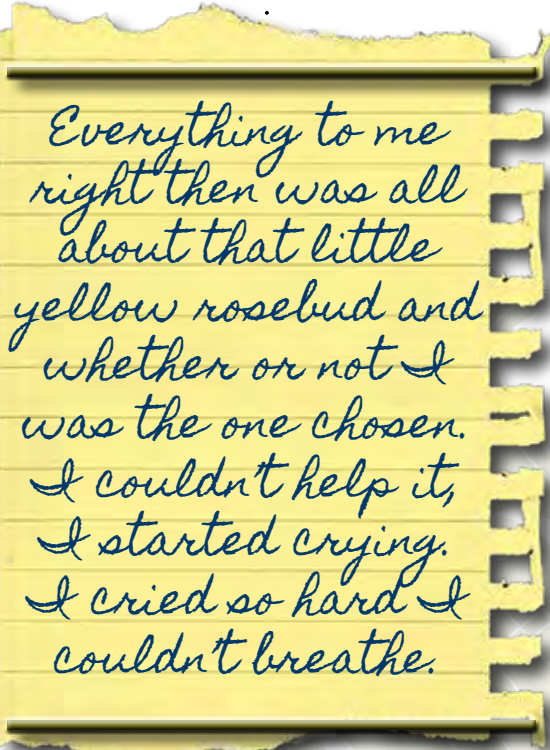
Now I know I was acting like a child, but I couldn't help it. I kept thinking about all that, and I couldn't even grieve, not then, not there. I felt like if I fainted or something, they would all see, and the more I thought about that, the more I felt faint and then I was really fainting, I think, and some of them were trying to catch me. It all looked swirly and gray, like I was in pea soup—well, I've never fainted before in my life and I didn't then, just almost.

Everything to me right then was all about that little yellow rosebud and whether or not I was the one chosen. I couldn't help it, I started crying. I cried so hard I couldn't breathe. I kept thinking they didn't mean all the things they said to me and all the hugging. Now I loved that man, I loved Brownie, but if truth be told, right then I was not crying for Brownie, I was crying for myself. I knew they would all be shocked if they knew that.

I felt like everybody but that preacher was that way, and he was the only one who would feel right towards me, and he would give me that rosebud.

And then—I'm telling you the truth—then

I happened to look up for some reason, and it still makes chills go over me—over there, right past the tent, what did I see but a bunch of those balloons and another one of those signs. "Welcome Home, Brownie" it said, just like all the others. But that one had not been there before, and I will go to my grave saying that, because I saw it with my own eyes. I don't remember anything else about that day.



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The sisters showed up less and less at the Depot, and I never did find out who ended up with that little yellow rosebud. When the fiddler told me about those balloons—including the ones at the gravesite—I could not get the picture out of my head for days. In the years that followed, I often drove the highway that winds through the valley and looked up at that far blue mountain, imagining them.

It will always be Brownie's Mountain to me, and I recall a man I never met, a simple soul who would give away an inheritance as he might a sandwich to someone who needed it more than he.



**Charlton Walters Hillis** has a fine arts degree, but her first love is creative writing, primarily the short story. She has a nonfiction work in progress of an art buyer in the Voronezh region of Russia.





# Rocket Man

By Ben Hunt

A few days before Thanksgiving, 1960, anxious NASA engineers were shocked and dismayed by the historic failure of the first Project Mercury flight test at Cape Canaveral, Florida.

Determined to match the success and pace of the Russians' space program, America's own program was in its infancy, and that day's *failure to launch* would go down in aeronautical history as the "*four-inch flight*." After a normal countdown, the Mercury-Redstone's engine ignited on schedule, but shut down immediately after lift-off, traveling only four inches before settling back down onto the pad. The escape rocket jettisoned, leaving the capsule still attached to the rocket. Although the spacecraft was not manned, there was an immediate danger—the fully-fueled and powered-up Redstone was sitting *unsecured* on the launch pad. What's more, the capsule's main and reserve parachutes had deployed and were hanging down on the side of the spacecraft; they could have easily caught a strong wind and tipped over the rocket.

There was a spreading panic in the control room, and the launch team was at a loss to come up with a solution to release the pressurized fuel and solve the crisis. Flight Director Christopher Kraft was incredulous at one engineer's suggestion that they get a rifleman to shoot some holes into the side of the rocket to bleed off the pressure. He thought that it would have been obvious to everyone in the room that the slightest spark from a bullet could ignite the volatile mix of liquid oxygen and kerosene.

Finally, a brave McDonnell Aircraft employee crawled to the base of the rocket and shut down the ignition systems. The hero of the day was J.B. Hunt—but *I knew him as Granddad*.

My grandfather impacted a lot of lives. He was born in Clarksville, Tennessee in the midst of the Great Depression, and he went from being a lineman climbing power poles for Cumberland Electric in North Central Tennessee to a missile pad

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supervisor in Cape Canaveral, Florida where he witnessed the Golden Age of NASA and the space race.

He eventually found his way to Alabama, where he became the managing designer at Rust Engineering, until he retired at the age of 62. He found great pride in his work and his family. He also survived his life through nearly insurmountable odds. He was too young for the draft during World War II, and my grandmother fell ill in the early '50s, which kept him from enlisting to fight in the Korean War.

He survived a heart attack, a triple by-pass and a stroke—all before he was fifty-five years old. He had an unshakable will to survive, from hospitals to health, and he always had an eye on his future—to walk again, to work again and to take care of his family.

But that's just facts on paper; the better way to illustrate who he was is through the eyes of the five-year-old blonde grandson who idolized him. When I was five, we built a workshop in the backyard of their old house. My grandmother sewed me a little yellow work apron with a holster for a hammer and a small pocket for a pencil.

Now, as a five-year-old, my carpentry skills weren't quite as honed as I might lead you to believe. The hammer that he bought me was only about seven inches long and weighed maybe a pound. In fact, it never could drive in a nail, but I'd hit it once, and then he'd finish it, and there would be pride in both his eyes and mine at a job well done. After our hard work he'd carry me back up to the house (I'd

say I was too tired to walk). We'd get in his old grey Toyota pickup truck, and he'd sit me in his lap and let me "drive." He'd have

his hand on mine on the gear shift and pretend I was changing gears while he used the clutch and turned the wheel.

We'd then arrive at McDonald's, where he'd take his coffee—one part coffee, five parts cream. I used to love the way it tasted. I loved the time we spent together, and I wanted to be just like my grandfather.

Sometimes I would wait until everyone was away and I'd put on his fisherman's hat and sweater and

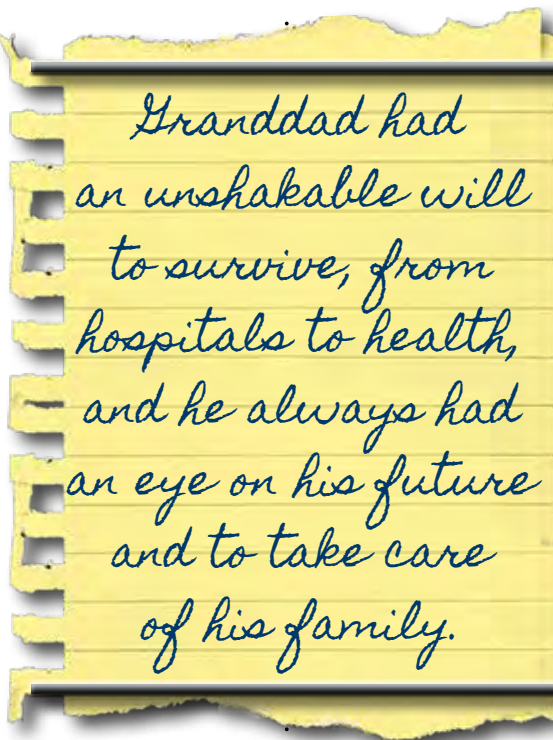
jump into the living room and shout, "Look! I'm Granddad!"

My grandfather passed away a few years ago, but long before that, I had been keenly aware of how he shaped my life. He was responsible for my disposition for kindness, my fondness of westerns, and even my love of peanut butter and computers, and I loved him unconditionally.

Granddad led a life that gave me a loving family, a wonderful childhood, and he served as a role model in my life. I can only hope I can live up to be half the man he was. Because, whether it was crawling under a *time bomb of a rocket* to shut down the ignition systems or helping a five-year-old build a *backyard state-of-the-art workshop*, it was all in a day's work for my own hero—my grandfather.



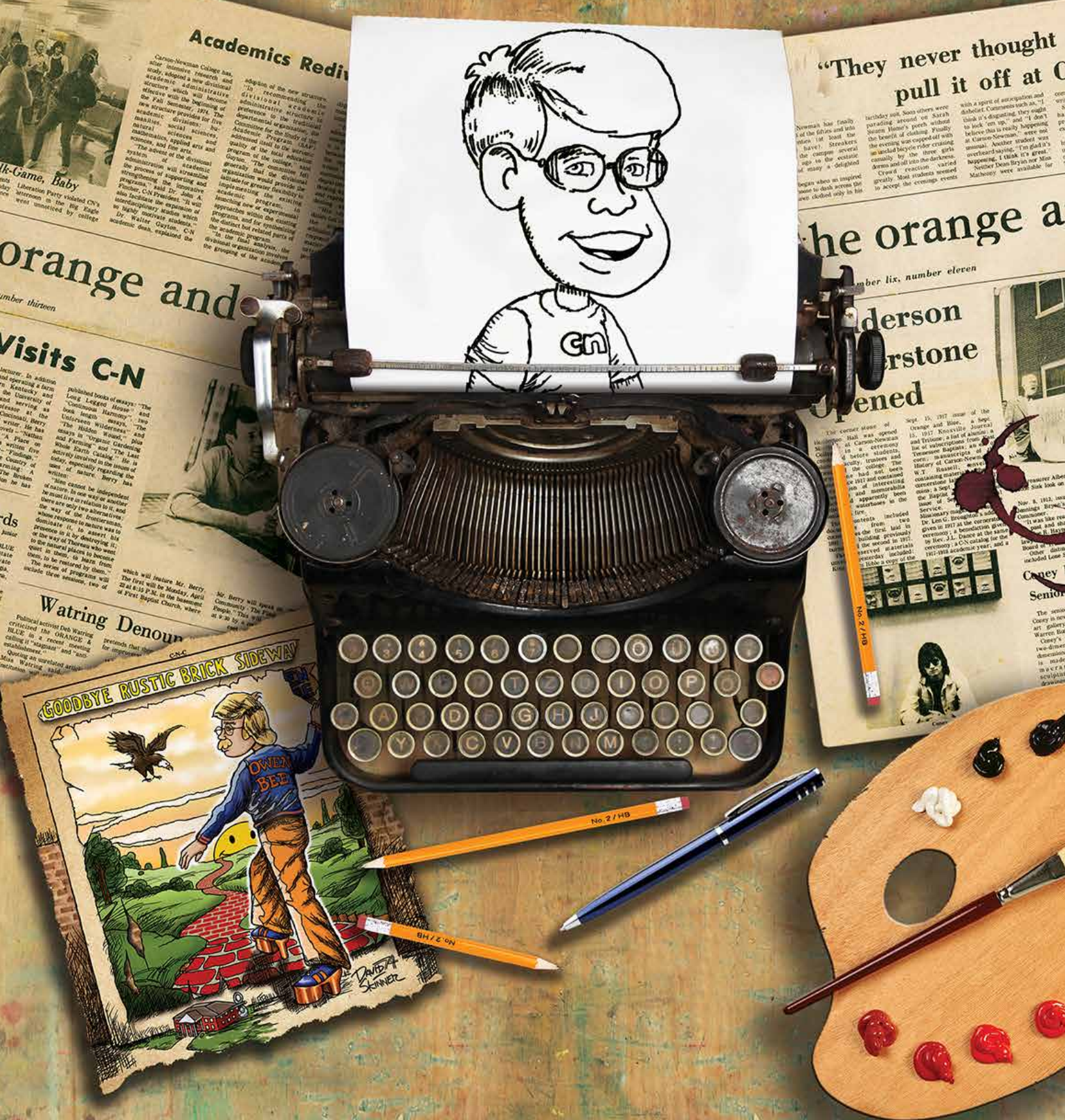
**Ben Hunt** lives in Alabama, where he is known (at least by his family) to be an impressive and creative carpenter.



*Granddad had  
an unshakable will  
to survive, from  
hospitals to health,  
and he always had  
an eye on his future  
and to take care  
of his family.*



# Owen's Back!



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# Another Man's Shoes

By David Ray Skinner



he winter of late 1976 and early 1977 was an unusually long and cold one in middle Tennessee. It started snowing on New Year's Eve, and it seemed like it didn't stop until Spring. Or, at least the snow and ice stayed on the ground.

I was painfully aware of this. Just the summer before, I had gleefully bought a 1965 Volkswagen van. This was inspired by "Urge," the one driven by David Ray Davenport (no relation) in Gurney Norman's *"Divine Right's Trip,"* a novel that had been printed in its entirety in the lower left- and right-hand corners of the *Whole Earth Catalog*.

I called mine "Van Go," but unfortunately, most of the time, it didn't. However, I still thought the name fit, because, as a recent graduate with an art degree, I couldn't help but notice that the old VW had one of its rearview mirrors missing...like an old ear.

The microbus looked okay on the outside, but the interior had been stripped down in an apparent failed attempt to convert it into a hippie wagon. There was no upholstery, only shards of metal where the door handle were supposed to be, and the only two seats in the van weren't even bolted down...they were held down by the seatbelts, or I should say, they were held down if the seatbelts were used. If they weren't used, they flopped around like renegade rocking chairs. I had thrown lounge chairs in the back for when I had more than one passenger.

Once the weather turned cold, I discovered that the van's heater wasn't hooked up. Even when Volkswagen microbus heaters worked correctly, they were ineffective at best; the old vans captured the heat from the engine, which was located in the rear, and piped it throughout the interior. That was, unless the upholstery was dismantled to convert it into a hippie wagon. Since that was the case, I could turn the heat on, but it just blew out the tube in the very back of the van—a long, long way from the driver's seat on a cold winter night.

I finally gave in and bought a long piece of heater hose and several thick, pea-green moving blankets...the kind the movers throw between your furniture in the truck to keep it from banging against each other and getting scratched.

*I called my old Volkswagen classic microbus "Van Go," but unfortunately, most of the time, the old van just wouldn't go.*







I would wrap myself from head to knee in the heavy green blankets and run the heater hose from the rear up to the front and wedge it into the quilted folds. People often stared and pointed. *I must have looked like an alien nun driving down Interstate 40.*

To make matters worse, once the temperature dropped below 40 degrees, the van's starter wouldn't work. It would crank, crank and crank (without starting) until the battery gave out. So, I got in the habit of parking on an incline, so I could jumpstart the van. This was done fairly easily with the van's manual four-speed; I'd just turn on the key, get it rolling four or five miles per hour in first or second gear with the clutch depressed...then, I'd pop the clutch and *Van Go* would spring to life.

However, when there was no incline, I'd have to push the van by myself (in neutral), jump up into the driver's seat (which was usually rocking around, **remember**), turn the key, push in the clutch, throw the gearshift up into gear, pop the clutch, and hope that the van had reached the minimum four miles per hour.

The only problem with this procedure was the shard of metal that used to be the door handle; inevitably, the door would slam shut as I was jumping from the street into the driver's seat, and the torn-off handle would tear into my pants and occasionally my leg. It's a wonder I didn't get tetanus that winter. Plus, the pants would be ruined, but in an attempt to salvage them, I'd cut them off and convert them to shorts. For 20 years after that, every time I moved into a new apartment, I'd find cut-off blue jeans, dress pants, and khakis with a ragged slit in the left leg.

Not long after I had bought the van, I found my first job in Nashville as an art director. Although I didn't really know what an art director was, the guy that hired me knew even less

about what an art director was. Together, we somehow figured out how to publish a travel book about Nashville, *and had he not run out of money, I'm sure it would have been a big success.* But, one morning when I showed up for work, he told me he couldn't afford to pay me any more. "How am I going to pay my rent?" I asked.

"Easy," he replied, "You move in with us and live rent-free."

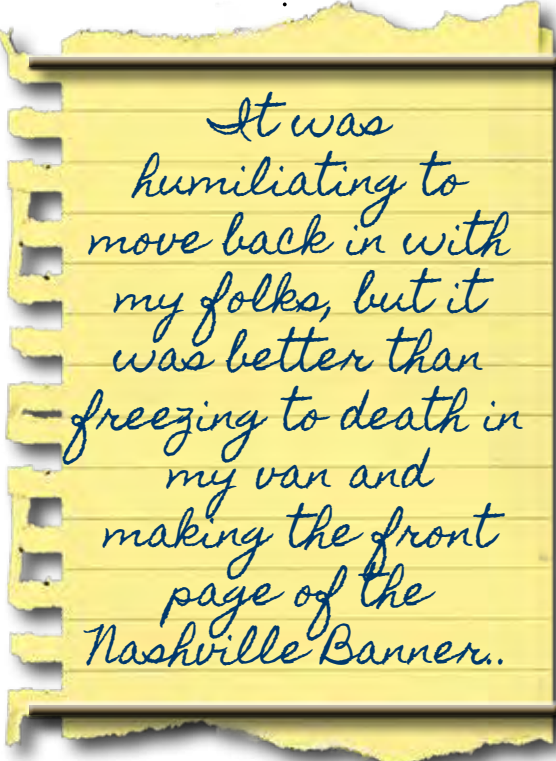
"Us" was my boss, two rodeo cowboys (one who was real and the other who just wore the clothes) and a cowgirl, all under the roof of a sprawling, suburban house on a high hill in Brentwood, just south of Nashville. The house's steep driveway was perfect for push-starting *Van Go*. Perfect, that is, until New Year's Eve, when it snowed and iced over. If you've ever tried to push-start a car on a sheet of ice, you know that it won't work...*when you pop the clutch, the tires just lock up and slide on the ice.*

When I finally got *Van Go* started, I drove to my dad and stepmother's house in Lebanon (just east of Nashville on Interstate 40), parked it and spent the rest of that winter there.

After being out on my own, it was humiliating to have to move back in with my folks to cocoon for the winter, but it was better than freezing to death and making the front page of the *Nashville Banner*: "Alien Nun Found Frozen in Pseudo Hippie Van."

So, you can imagine my sheer joy when Spring came knocking on the door that March. Then, my friend, Filmore called from Knoxville and said that he was going to have a *Spring Equinox* party to welcome the season and to celebrate the demise of the long, cold winter.

Back in those days—*before he became a priest*—Filmore used to have some outrageous parties, and this one promised to outrage the outrageous.



*It was humiliating to move back in with my folks, but it was better than freezing to death in my van and making the front page of the Nashville Banner..*



I changed the oil in *Van Go*, and got it as road-worthy as I could. I then threw a bag of clean clothes and my old guitar in the back (with the lounge chairs) and headed down Interstate 40. When I arrived at Filmore's, the East Tennessee weather had started warming up, and the preparations of the *Spring Thing* were in high gear. It was a gathering of the tribe, as it were, and folks were coming in from all over.

I had met Filmore in the first week of our Freshman year at Carson-Newman a half dozen years before. He was one of the founding members of our band, *Contents Under Pressure*, the name taken from the label of a can of shaving cream sold at the college bookstore to returning students as part of a Value Toiletry Pack. The band had been the eye of the hurricane for the college's fringe rebels, many of which were returning for the celebration.

Filmore, however, had dropped out of Carson-Newman and later studied art, namely expressionist painting, at the University of Tennessee. As a manifestation of this interest, he had stretched a 20-foot canvas on the side of an old wooden garage and had set out brushes and paints for the guests attending the *Spring Thing*; the painting that we would collectively create was to be the *Thing's* big event...one that hopefully would survive as a piece of art beyond the Spring of 1977, and the 20th Century, as well.

We were in the middle of a hotly-contested game of Frisbee football when Filmore called out from his front porch that my dad was calling long distance—*never a good sign*. Sure enough, my dad gave me the sad news that my grandmother had passed away. The funeral was going to be in a couple of days in the old hometown of Dover, on the cusp between Middle and West Tennessee, and they wanted me and all the other grandsons to be pallbearers.

It was one of my first experiences of cascading lives, where past eras of my life—in *this case, my childhood and my college days*—

collided and ground against each other like the earth's plates.

Here was my dilemma: I knew that *Van Go* would get me back to Lebanon (where I would ride down to Dover with my dad and my stepmother); but I was fairly sure that the old van would not make the return trip to East Tennessee and back again after the funeral. I had taken the entire week off, and I had been looking forward to seeing and playing music with some of my Gatlinburg friends that following weekend.

The only solution was to leave *Van Go* in Filmore's back yard, hitchhike the 200 miles back to my dad's house in Lebanon, and, after the funeral, hitchhike back to Knoxville, pick up *Van Go* and continue my East Tennessee vacation. I'm not saying it was totally logical...but that's just the way we thought back in those days. Plus, just the year before, I had spent three months on the road, hitching all up and down the West Coast.

I wasn't that comfortable with it, because of the obvious danger and factor of the unknown, but I knew how to do it.

Filmore took me, my bag of clothes and my guitar to the Cedar Bluff Road entrance to Interstate 40/75, in west Knoxville, and before long, I got a ride. However, they were going to Atlanta, and they dropped me off where Interstate 40/75 splits, I-75 heading south to Chattanooga, and I-40 continuing west to Nashville. The problem was, it was the middle of nowhere. I had always been wary of hitchhikers standing in the middle of nowhere, far from the nearest exit, and now that mysterious hitchhiker was me.

While I was in the middle of pondering my predicament, a blurred brown flash screeched to a halt fifty yards or so ahead of me (it's hard to come to a standing stop when you're doing 70 or 80 miles per hour). I ran the distance and half expected the old Chevy stationwagon



to pull off when I was within a few yards... that was apparently some sort of mean-spirited sport back in those days. I approached on the passenger's side, opened the front door first (so I could jump in if they were thinking of driving off with my guitar and bag of clothes...another mean-spirited sport), and threw my guitar and clothes bag into the back seat and swung into the front seat.

The tired-eyed man behind the stationwagon's wheel looked like he was most likely in his late fifties. He was dressed in workclothes, and he wore a two-day stubble of beard on his chin. He sized me up as the stationwagon idled there at the side of the interstate.

"Do you have a current driver's license?" he finally asked.

I laughed and pointed at my guitar and said, "Sure, that's not my regular car."

He looked into the rear-view mirror and spotted my guitar on the backseat. "Good grief," he said, "you're a picker...no wonder you're on foot. Where are you headed?"

"Lebanon," I said, and seeing his confused look, added, "It's just east of Nashville."

"Look," he said, "Here's the deal. I've been driving all night and I'm tired, and I've got a long way to go. I'll let you ride to this side of Nashville, but I'd appreciate it if you'd drive and let me take a nap."

So, I went around to the driver's side as he slid across the seat, still watching carefully and wondering what I would do if he decided to drive off with my stuff when I was behind the car. Once inside, I felt a need to explain why I was hitching. "I do have my own car," I said as I pulled off the shoulder accelerating onto the interstate, "It's a vintage 1965 Volkswagen van."

"Again," he laughed, "No wonder you're on foot."

"Ouch!" I said.

"Oh, I'm just giving you a hard time," he

grinned, "I used to be in the music business, myself," he explained.

"Doing what?"

"Well, I know it's hard to believe by looking at me now, but I used to be the conductor of an orchestra."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, that's so. But that was quite a while ago. I got burnt out. I gave it all up, threw in my baton and moved to the mountains of Carolina where life is a lot simpler. I'm on my first vacation in a long time. I hadn't really needed one."

"I'm guessing there's not a lot of orchestras in the mountains."

"Like I said, I gave it all up...now I'm a short order cook."

I looked over at him to see if he was putting me on, but he was settling into the seat, leaning up against the passenger door and pulling his painter's cap down over his eyes.

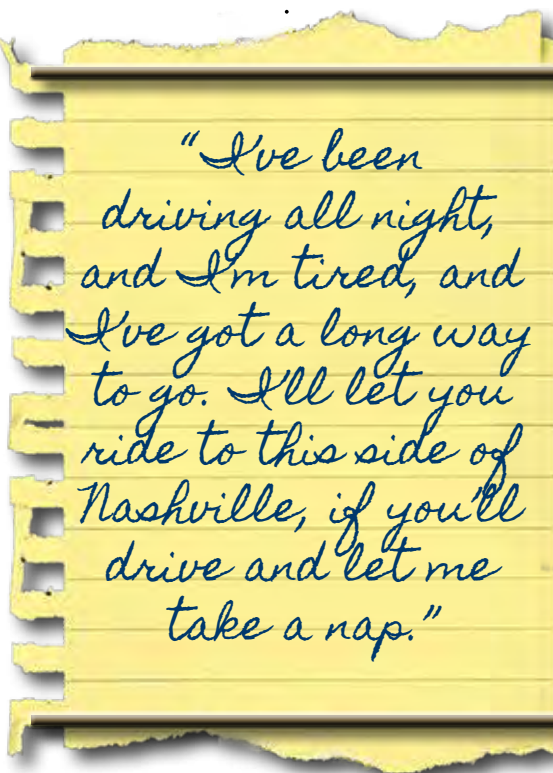
"So what kind of music do you play on that thing?" he asked, thumbing in the direction of my guitar on the backseat.

"I don't know exactly what you'd call it. Country, I guess. I write my own songs."

"Country!" he laughed, sitting up and adjusting

his cap. "I got a story for you."

"Back around '49 or '50, I was in a bar in Chicago one cold winter night, just drinking to try and keep warm. Outside, it was snowing to beat the band, and every time someone walked in from off the street, the Chicago wind would blow the snow and ice through the room like a Siberian tornado. So, we were all huddled around the bar like a bunch of stunned sheep. The door opened, for what seemed to be the hundredth time, only this time instead of one of the usual suspects, this tall thin hillbilly walks in, pretty as you please, like he didn't have a care in the world. And if he did have a coat, it wasn't an overcoat or a heavy coat like the rest





of us huddled around our drinks were wearing. And his clothes were unlike any clothes I'd ever seen before. To begin with, he was wearing a big ol' Stetson, which was not all that common in Chicago, and his shirt was all sparkly with glittering cactus plants and lassos. He looked like a cowboy that had been dipped in shiny sprinkles.

"And he walks up to the bar friendly enough, but friendly in a way like he owned the place, and he ordered a beer and a shot of Jack Daniels, and ordered another round of both before he'd barely finished the first two. Now while the barmaid is pouring his second shot, the fellow that had been sitting next to me—a crusty ol' dock worker—slides over and sits on the barstool next to the hillbilly, all the while looking at the guy's feet. And we're all thinking, uh oh, here we go. And I'm thinking, man, it's just too cold for a fight. It's a real mess when blood freezes, and if one of 'em goes through the big plate glass window, all that snow and ice out there is gonna be here in a matter of seconds...like some giant, dimly lit, polar vacuum.

"But the hillbilly cowboy takes it all in stride. He smiles at the guy and raises his glass slightly in a casual sort of toast as the dock worker clears his throat and says, 'Hey Buddy, I was just admiring your boots.' And that's usually how it starts. People around the bar were starting to pay attention to the scene...the bar got all quiet except for the bar stools scraping as people jockeyed for position to get a better look at what they thought would be the oncoming fireworks.

"I mean it,' the guy says, 'I've never seen a pair of boots as beautiful as those.' Of course, we were all still thinking that he was trying to start something, but then it slowly dawned on us that this old dock worker was serious!"

"So, were they?" I asked, as the East Tennessee landscape rushed by. I checked the

old stationwagon's speedometer as a Tennessee Highway Patrolman came up quickly on my left side and watched with relief as he whizzed on past.

"Were they what?" asked my storyteller, still leaning comfortably against the passenger door.

"Beautiful? Were the country boy's boots beautiful?"

"Oh, I don't know," he answered, half grinning, half irritated, "I didn't get that good of a look at 'em. All I can remember is they went with his outfit. But this old dock worker thought they were special.

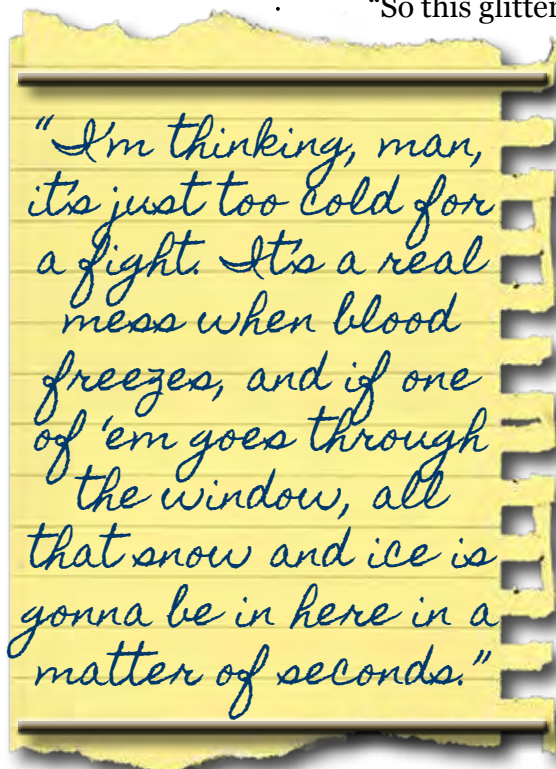
"So this glitter cowboy threw back a shot of Jack Daniels, set his glass down on the bar, leans back and pulls the boots off, one by one. Then he reaches down and picks both of 'em up and puts 'em down on a little table by the bar. Then he kind of tips his cowboy hat and he gives the old dock worker a crooked grin and says, 'Mister, here, they're yours.'

"Well, the old dock worker looks at him for a few seconds, like he can't believe his ears. I guess he thought the hillbilly was going to change his mind, 'cause he reaches

over, grabs the boots and runs out of the bar without so much as a 'thank you,' 'kiss my foot' or nothing.

"Nobody in the bar said anything. There was just a kind of stunned silence. Then, after a moment, it's like somebody plugged the plug back in or pushed the 'reset' button, and everybody went back to drinking and carrying on. Including the hillbilly. He turned back around to the bar and ordered another beer with a shot of J.D. And he finished 'em off just as quick. Then he slid a bill under his beer mug, tipped his hat and pulled open the big cold doors, and headed back out into the snow and ice. Barefoot.

"I told the barmaid that old dock worker could have at least left him his old workboots,



*"I'm thinking, man, it's just too cold for a fight. It's a real mess when blood freezes, and if one of 'em goes through the window, all that snow and ice is gonna be in here in a matter of seconds."*

and she just laughed. I asked her, 'Has that cowboy fellow been in here before?'

"Oh yeah," she said.

"And I asked her what kind of crazy S.O.B. is he, anyway...giving up his shoes in this kind of weather?"

"Oh he ain't exactly crazy," she said, 'He's just a country singer.'

"What country?" I asked.

"Country," she said, 'As in Country Western. His name's Hank Williams. They say he's famous down there in Tennessee.'

"So, I guess it would sound like I was bragging, or at least stretching the truth, to say he was a friend of mine, but I can at least say he was a drinking buddy.

"Of course, everybody else in that bar that snowy night has probably said the same kind of thing and told the same story their own way with their own slant."

---

As my new friend's Hank Williams story began to sink in, we suddenly passed the sign announcing my parents' exit off Interstate 40. "This is where I'm getting off," I told him as I slowed the stationwagon, "My parents' house is just a mile or two on up the road."

"You've gotten used to the wheel," he smiled, "You may as well go on and drive yourself all the way to the house. Unless you want to drive me all the way to Oklahoma."

"I can't miss my grandmother's funeral," I told him.

---

My grandmother's funeral was in Dover a few days later, and it was a carbon copy of so many others that I had attended with my family, my

aunts and uncles, and even with her. There was the standard Baptist preaching and singing, and then we buried her next to my grandfather in an old country cemetery that we had passed for countless years on the way to picnics and family reunions at the lake.

At my Uncle Ray's house, back in town, we all fixed plates from the food that the neighbors and kinfolks had brought in. As I ate fried chicken and potato salad, I started thinking about the trip ahead; first back to Lebanon in the car with my dad and stepmother, and then hitch back to Knoxville to revive and retrieve Van Go (and hope the temperature stayed above 40 degrees).

"David Ray," my Uncle Ray interrupted my reverie, "did you bring your guitar?"

"It's in the car," I said.

"How about a song?" he asked.

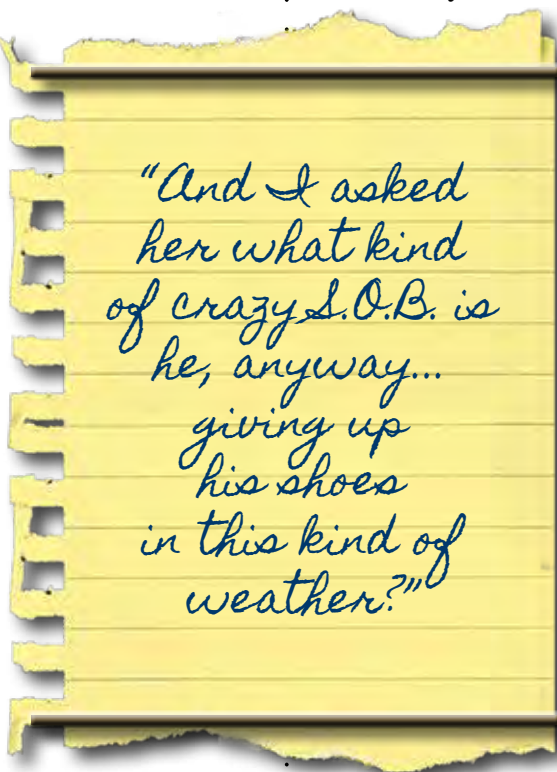
I went outside and pulled my old guitar out of the trunk and brought it into the house.

"I've got a couple of new songs I've just written," I said, tuning the low E string.

"That's great," said Uncle Ray, "but I was thinking maybe you could play some Hank Williams."

I played a short bluegrass intro and started singing, "*I wandered so aimless...*" and one by one, everybody put their plates down and joined in.

Click here to listen to the musical version:  
<http://www.equilt.com/AnotherMansShoes.mp3>







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# Daddy's in the Closet

## *...and he's staying there!*

By Idgie at the Dew

M

y Daddy went to his glory ten years ago. Before he passed on, he told me he didn't want a funeral and he didn't want a plot in a cemetery. He wanted to experience the same going off ceremony my Mama had two years earlier.

But you see, he's still in a box in my closet.

Unnerves the heck out of my family at times, I'll tell you. I joke with them, and tell them that this way he keeps up on things, that I go in and chat about the day's activities while I'm deciding on what shoes to wear. He used to be on the mantle, but that made a few visitors nearly swoon and give me nervous looks. Last year, a recordable toy that you could leave your message on got lost in my closet after my son had recorded some gobble-dygook on it, and it kept going off. We were sure it was Daddy trying to communicate from the Great Beyond. Well, that was a little nerve-wracking. Hubby was telling me to get my dadblamed daddy out of the closet right then! Luckily, we found the toy before we had to move Daddy to the garage—and before an exorcism had to be performed.

So a little flashback is required here to see why he's still in the closet and probably will be for the foreseeable future. As previously mentioned, two years before Daddy went fishing with the Lord, Mama headed that way first, to set up the picnic. Before she passed, she told me her last wish, and it was one which I found really odd. My mama couldn't swim, she was actually quite terrified of water, and she had once told me that she'd had a premonition that she would drown (she didn't). So her request was that her ashes be sprinkled over the ocean. Sure Mama, whatever—makes perfect sense to me.

We had the "funeral"—and all family members know exactly what I mean by that—a more whack job of a funeral I've never been to in my life, but that's a whole other story (let's just say Daddy had obviously found the

*Luckily, we found the toy before we had to move Daddy to the garage—and before an exorcism had to be performed.*







liquor for the reception, early on). Relatives flew in from everywhere for the shindig. First time in ages we'd all been in the same room. Death certainly brings you closer, doesn't it? On the spur of the moment, we all decided that we would wait until sunset, go to the ocean and take Mama's ashes out onto the jetty and let them go free to find the Lord. Sounds wonderful, doesn't it?

Well, we might have forgotten in our desire to please Mama one last time that this was actually illegal. Oopsie. We forgot that sunset also means the sun goes down and you can't see a dadgum thing. We forgot about the tide coming in. We forgot a lot of things.

We also forgot my daddy was blind.

We headed out in a caravan of cars and got to a nice spot by the ocean to spread the ashes. Then we realized that half of us were in dresses and to spread the ashes we would need to climb rocks to get to the "jumping off point."

Hubby took the lead.

He had Mama in the box under his arm and was trying to climb up a rock cliff to get to the water's edge. Half of us finally managed to clamber up the rocks. The other half decided to remain on the beach and ask for descriptions later.

Suddenly, the people on the beach started asking how long this was going to take and had we noticed that the beach was disappearing under high tide (of course not, it was too dark!)?

Daddy was down there yelling, "What's happening, I can't see! Is she in the ocean yet? Anyone have a match for my cigarette?"

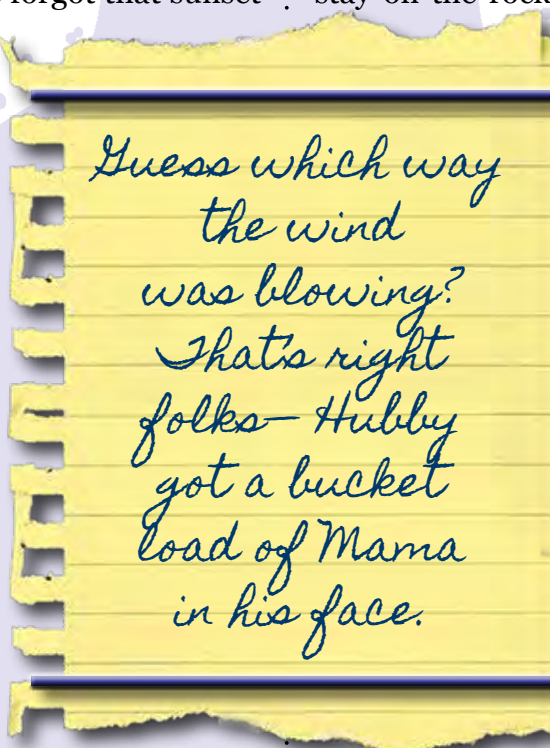
The family members on the beach quit wait-

ing for the spreading of the ashes; they started getting all the kids off the beach before they drowned or some nonsense. Daddy wouldn't leave, he wanted to wait for me—just great. Hubby got to the top of the cliff, and we said a prayer and released the ashes. Guess which way the wind was blowing? That's right folks—Hubby got a bucket load of Mama in his face.

It was almost dark and we realized that below us there was really not much beach left to get back to, and we didn't want to stay on the rocks to find our way back, that would have been too dangerous. Hubby threw the box down into the sea. It immediately came back and wedged into a crevice in the rocks.

"Um, Hubby darling, this is illegal—what we're doing here." I told him, "There is now a mortuary box on the boulder where anyone can see it and track us down. It has our name on it."

Hubby heaved a big manly sigh, wiped a bit more of Mama out of his hair and headed down the ocean side of the cliff to get the box. The tide was getting higher, the wind stronger, current nastier, and the dark was coming down on our heads. Someone told me to get my Daddy off the beach. He wouldn't leave till I came and fetched him though, so I left Hubby to the box situation and clambered on down the rocks to Daddy. As I was walking him off the beach, he was rambling on about his cigarettes and asking if the spreading was lovely or not—I told him to feel Hubby's face. We were then walking in water, tripping and stumbling on little rocks and heaven only knows what else. Hubby was still on the wrong side of the cliff





in the dark, and I started getting worried.

Suddenly, full dark came. I was yelling for the family to guide me off the beach. Still no Hubby. Finally, I heard harsh cursing and the clunking noises of a body falling in back of me, so I know that at least Hubby was on my side of the cliff, injuries notwithstanding. Daddy noticed nothing, he was blind after all, and didn't even know it was dark out. He just wanted a match for his cigarette before he expired from his nicotine addiction.

Hubby showed up wet, bruised, and with Mama bits on his face. He did have the mortuary box, though, so at least we wouldn't be arrested. We got to the car,

exhausted; a few of us almost got swept out to sea or fell off the cliff, one or two of us had ashes in our hair, and we were all wet. It was then that Daddy announced to all, "That was beautiful—I want the same thing done for me when I die."

That, dear friends, is why Daddy's in the closet!



**Idgie at the Dew** is the pseudonym for a very talented editor/writer who has an incredible "southern sister" online magazine called "Dew On the Kudzu." You can check it out at [www.dewonthekudzu.com](http://www.dewonthekudzu.com).

*Hubby showed up wet, bruised, and with Mama bits on his face. He did have the mortuary box, though, so at least we wouldn't be arrested.*



# The Fourth of July

By Chuck Holmes



Carrie Lena Peacock at sixteen was not particularly pretty. Her lips were a little too thin. Her face was a little too long. And her figure was mostly straight where it should have been curved.

But, even at sixteen, Carrie Lena seemed to be able to get anything she wanted out of any boy she wanted it from.

Her secret was almost Biblical. It wasn't that Carrie Lena was particularly devout; sometimes she really didn't pay attention in Sunday School. But every time somebody brought up Hebrews 11:1, she thought of boys. *Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.* That's how she got Jacob Millsap to take her to the Junior-Senior Prom, and he was glad he did, even though he went home in great pain. And that's how she got Howie Pickens to take her to Raleigh to the Canton Inn and buy her fried rice. He, like most of the others, kept hoping, but not seeing.

There was no question that Carrie Lena could get about anything she wanted. The only question that June morning was which boy she wanted it from. Carrie Lena sat on the side of her bed, staring at herself in the mirror on the dresser. Carrie Lena had never really understood why the boys were always thinking about just how far they could go with a girl. But, she thought as she sat there smiling at her reflection in the mirror, you didn't have to understand it to make it work for you. And you didn't really have to do anything, either. As long as they thought you might. Since it was already the middle of the morning, her mother and daddy had already gone to work at the family's grocery. School was out, and she really didn't have any place she had to be. She thought about falling back into the bed and sleeping until noon, but she decided against that. The Fourth of July celebration was only three weeks away, and she didn't have anybody to take her to the street dance that night. Carrie Lena decided it was time for her to choose her date.

She thought about Jacob Millsap, but Jacob couldn't dance, and he might not be as easily handled on the second date. Howie Pickens was a pretty good dancer, but he had spent most of the evening at the Canton Inn talking about his prize pigs. She didn't want another evening of prize pigs. Johnnie Smithdale was going steady. Charley McLamb didn't treat his dates very well; Carolyn

The Fourth of July celebration was only three weeks away, and she didn't have anybody to take her to the street dance that night.





Sue O'Connor said the one time she went out with him, it seemed like he had grown at least two more hands. It looked like she was down to one of the Johnson twins, either Travis or Trevor. As Carrie Lena pulled on a pair of short shorts and a halter top, she was wishing that she lived in a bigger town than Congress.

"Okay," she thought. "Who would it be?" Travis or Trevor. Not that it mattered, since they looked just alike.

In the week between the time Carrie Lena set her sights on one of the Johnson twins and when she actually found one of them, she encountered three boys who were not on her list. Howie Pickens came into the grocery store while she was putting canned beans on the shelf. He stood over by the cash register for a couple of minutes watching her while she ignored him. Finally, he came over to her.

"Hey, Carrie Lena."

"Hey, Howie." She continued stacking beans on the shelf until it occurred to her that stooping over with her back to him wasn't the best position for her to be in.

She stood up and pushed her hair back on her forehead. When she looked him in the eye, Howie started studying a box of cake mix.

"I was wondering if you're going to the street dance," he said, still eyeing the cake mix box.

"Oh, I don't know. It's something I've already done three or four times. Maybe not this year."

"Well, I was hoping you'd go with me."

Carrie Lena turned around and picked up two more cans of beans and put them on the shelf. Telling boys "no" was one of the skills she honed; she pushed them away, but not too far.

"It's nice of you to ask me, Howie. Real sweet. But I don't think I want to go again this year.

Maybe we can do something else, later."

Howie started to say something, then stopped.

Finally, he said, "I'd like to do that."

She had essentially the same conversation with Jacob Millsap and Ronnie Jones, pushing both of them away just a little bit. Finally, she found a good time to talk to one of the Johnson twins, and when she started, she wasn't sure just which one it was. He was standing at the magazine rack of Dixon's Drug Store, flipping through a Captain Marvel comic book.

Whichever one he was, Carrie Lena decided that he looked good enough to take her to the dance. He was tall and had blond hair, and his teeth were only a little bucked. He was wearing chinos and a short-sleeved, light-blue shirt with a button-down collar. He looked a lot like those pictures of college boys that Carrie Lena had seen in the magazines. She decided she could do a lot worse.

As she walked by him, she let her hip lightly brush his as she passed. He looked around.

"Travis," she said, making sure that she used the smile that showed all of her

front teeth. She thought that her teeth were one of her best features.

"Trevor," he said.

"Oh, darn. I never can keep you two straight. Y'all look just about exactly alike. I don't know how two people can be so good looking."

Carrie Lena had learned at an early age that you couldn't be subtle when you were trying to get a boy's attention. Trevor, for his part, was trying not to show the pinkness that was rising from his neck up his face. Congress boys didn't admit to blushing.

"I was just going to get me a Coke," she said. "I don't guess you'd want to have a

*He looked a lot like those pictures of college boys that Carrie Lena had seen in the magazines. She decided she could do a lot worse.*



Coke with me.”

Trevor stuffed the Captain Marvel comic in the first rack his hand hit, mixing up Captain Marvel with Superman. “I’d like that,” he muttered.

She grabbed his hand and pulled him across the drug store to a booth. Carrie Lena slid into the booth, pulling Trevor into the seat beside her. They had hardly quit sliding when Edna, the Dixon’s old maid daughter was standing beside the booth. “What can I get y’all?” The Dixons really didn’t want teenagers cluttering up the booths at the drug store if they weren’t going to buy anything.

Trevor said, “I’ll have a cherry Co’Cola.” And he looked inquiringly at Carrie Lena. “That sounds good. I’ll have a cherry Co’Cola, too.”

While they waited for the cherry Cokes to arrive, Carrie Lena pulled a straw from the round holder on the table and began to peel the paper away, one thin sliver at a time. Very slowly. Trevor’s eyes locked on her fingers as they pulled thin strips of paper down the straw.

“So what have you been doing since school got out?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Been fishing some. And Travis and me, we went down to the beach. Fished some down there. Not a whole lot to do.”

“That’s Congress for you. There’s nothing to do here. After I graduate, I’m going to get me out of this town and go somewhere where they have a lot of people and all kinds of excitement.”

Edna brought the drinks, and Carrie Lena finished unwrapping her straw and put it in the drink. As she took her first sip, she batted

her eyelashes over the straw at Trevor. Trevor seemed to have forgotten that he was there to drink his cherry Coke.

“Your ice is going to melt,” she said, returning his attention to the drink in front of him.

“Uh-huh,” he responded, picking up the glass.

He still hadn’t taken his eyes off of Carrie Lena. She

saw his eyes get a little wider as she moved her leg just a little closer to his, close enough that she could feel the heat of his leg on hers—and she was sure that he could feel the same thing.

“You going with anybody now?” she asked. She knew that he wasn’t, not since he and Zona Faye McLamb had broken up, but it was an easy way to get into the subject at hand.

Trevor shook his head, making the straw connecting his mouth to the glass slosh Cherry Coke back and forth.

“Me, neither,” she said. “But I really don’t mind, because it gives me more time to do some things I need to, like help my mama.” Even as the words came out of her mouth, Carrie Lena wondered why she said that. It was a running battle between her and her mother just to get her to pick up her clothes and keep her room straight. Her mother had given up on her making up her bed years ago.

But, for some reason, it evidently impressed Trevor. Anyway, he was supposed to be the serious one of the Johnson boys.

“Well, that’s not exactly true all the time,” she continued. “Sometimes—*like now*—I wished I had a steady boyfriend.”

“Why’s that?” Trevor asked. That was his



first contribution to the conversation since he told her he had gone fishing.

"I guess I just don't like to be left out. The street dance on the Fourth of July is coming up, you know."

Trevor just stared at her as he sucked on his straw. Carrie Lena wondered if Trevor was as smart as she thought he was. But, as she knew, you couldn't be too subtle with a boy.

"I don't guess I could go if I don't have a date. You know, I just wouldn't feel right going to a dance by myself. People might think the wrong thing."

As she said it, she slid her leg a millimeter closer to his, just enough to increase the body heat.

He finally took the straw out of his mouth. "Well, I hadn't thought about going to the street dance, but I guess I could—if you'd like to go with me."

Carrie Lena waited a couple of seconds before she answered. "Well, that would be nice, if you're sure you want to," she said. "I mean, I wouldn't want to put you out or anything."

Carrie could almost see him trying to reposition the words in her last sentence, but since he couldn't, he just nodded.

"Naw, I'd like to go to the street dance with you," he said. "It wouldn't put me out none at all."

"That's just fine. We'll plan on going to the street dance together then. I'm glad I ran into you here today."

Then she pressed her thigh up against his and watched as his eyes opened wider. His jaw dropped. And so did the cherry Coke, right into his lap. He didn't even move his leg as the Coca Cola moved in an ever-widening stain across the front of his chinos.

In the two weeks between their meeting at Dixon's Drug Store and the Fourth of July celebration, Trevor called Carrie Lena's house about a half-dozen times, asking her to go to the Princess to see a movie or down to Dixon's for a milk shake. Each time she was able to come up with an excuse that both kept her from having to do it and made him think that she was heart-broken because she couldn't. Twice she was sick, hinting vaguely at "female problems." Once she had to do some things for her mother. Once she had to visit her very sick, very old aunt who might not live much longer.

Once she had to go with her daddy to pick up some things for the grocery. And once, not able to come up with a good excuse, she just said, "I can't talk right now. I've got to go vomit."

She had to be very careful when she went out because she didn't want to run into Trevor or Travis downtown, and in a town the size of Congress, that took some planning. She began to wonder if getting to the street dance was worth all of the effort she was having to put into it. But she did make it through the two weeks, and the night of the

street dance finally came. Trevor had called and said that he would pick her up at her house at eight so that they'd be there right at the beginning of the street dance. And he told her that his daddy was going to let him drive their brand new 1955 Nash Rambler.

"Oh, that'll be real nice," she said. Her mind had already moved to the next occasion she would need a boy for. As she dressed for the street dance in plaid Bermuda shorts and a white blouse and sandals, she cataloged all of the boys left in Congress, and wondered if she'd have to start all over again.

However, when he pulled up in the brand-

*And once,  
not able to  
come up with a  
good excuse,  
she just said,  
"I can't talk  
right now.  
I've got to  
go vomit."*



new car on the night of the street dance, she had to admit to herself that she was impressed. It was so shiny, black on the bottom and white on the top. The chrome swept from the front to the back.

The car looked almost like it was going fast even as it stood still in front of her house. Carrie Lena began to think that maybe this was worth all of the effort.

She was even more impressed when her date got out of the car and walked up to her door. He had on clean-and-pressed chinos and a shirt with the little polo player on the pocket. Carrie Lena yelled good-bye to her mother and daddy, and went out to meet him.

"Trevor," she said. "That's just the prettiest car."

"Travis," he said, smiling and showing almost all of his front teeth.

Carrie Lena stopped. "Travis? I'm supposed to be going to the street dance with Trevor."

Travis stopped, stuck his hands in his pockets and studied the ground right in front of his shoes.

"Well, maybe I shouldn't have told you. I've been Trevor a lot of times, but I didn't think you'd mind. Trevor got a fishhook caught in his lip and his whole face is swole up. He didn't think you'd want to go to the street dance with somebody whose face looked like a puffed-up bullfrog."

It only took a second for Carrie Lena to reassess the situation. It hadn't mattered two weeks ago which of the Jones twins she ended up at the street dance with, and she couldn't see how it mattered now. "I'm just so sorry that Trevor got hurt," she said, with just the right amount of sadness in her voice, not so little as to make her seem heartless, but not so much to make

Travis think she was going to spend the whole night wishing he was his twin. "I'm sure we'll just have a wonderful time, anyway."

Travis escorted her back to the car and opened the door for her. The new car aroma streamed through the open door right into her face. It didn't even smell like cigarette smoke. Travis held the door open for her as she got in, then walked around to the driver's side. Carrie Lena was wishing that Carolyn Sue or Zona Faye could see her now in the brand new Rambler. And she wished it was more than three blocks to downtown.

Travis drove with the assurance of every seventeen-year-old boy, one arm resting on the open window, his hand on the top of the steering wheel. He glanced at Carrie Lena out of the corner of his eye. She crossed her leg so that her browned thigh showed at the bottom of her Bermuda shorts. And they each held their pose for the three blocks between Carrie Lena's and downtown. Travis pulled around behind City Hall and parked in the empty lot the town used for parking. Even from the parking lot, they could hear *Country Jim Campbell and the Smile Awhile Boys*. They got out of the car and headed for the music.

The Fourth of July street dance was the climax of the day's celebration. The festivities had started early in the morning with tractor pulls, greased pole climbing, and contests for the best jams, the largest tomatoes, and the most perfect cross-stitched piece.

At ten o'clock, there was the parade, featuring mounted riders, floats from the town's businesses, and the Congress school band. In the afternoon, there was the *Miss Congress* and the *Jr. Miss Congress* contests, modeled

"...Trevor got a fishhook caught in his lip and his whole face is swole up. He didn't think you'd want to go to the street dance with somebody whose face looked like a puffed-up bullfrog."

as closely as Erma Higgins could make it on the Miss America contests, but without the bathing suit competition. Erma, the librarian at the Congress Public Library, felt that bathing suits away from the water were just plain exhibitionistic.

Finally, there was the street dance. Every year since Carrie Lena could remember, *Country Jim Campbell and the Smile Awhile Boys* had provided the music for the dance, and every year since she could remember, they had started off with “*I’m looking over a four-leaf clover.*”

That’s what they were playing when Travis and Carrie Lena got to the roped-off block that was reserved for dancing and watching dancing. One end of the block, stoppered by Congress’ only police car, ran into Main Street. The other end, cordoned off with some black and white barricades, ran into Parrish Drive. Moore’s Livery Stables sat on the corner, and you could smell the mules, if you spent much time at that end of the street.

This early in the evening, there were only a few people dancing—the older crowd, who would dance a little and be gone by nine o’clock. Around the edges of the dancing area, clotted in groups according to age and community was the rest of the crowd, waiting for the older folks to go home. Right now, for Carrie Lena and her friends, the only thing to do was to see and be seen.

“You want a snow cone?” Travis asked.

Carrie Lena wondered what he could be thinking about. If you had a grape snow cone, you looked like you had a clown mouth, and if you had a lime snow cone you looked like you were about to die of jaundice and it was starting at your mouth. If

you had a strawberry snow cone, it looked like you had really cheap lipstick, and it was running all over your face. Nobody over eleven had a snow cone at the street dance, but, since the night was still young, all she said was, “No, thank you.”

Finally, Country Jim and his band quit playing square dance songs and went into a country and western version of “My Prayer.”

It didn’t sound the same as it did on the radio, but it was good enough. Travis took her hand, and she followed him out into the street.

When he first put his arm around her and pulled her body up to his, Carrie Lena wondered if she hadn’t gotten the better twin after all. She didn’t know how well Trevor danced, but this twin moved smoothly, holding her close, but not so close as to be obvious this early in the evening. Later, as the night grew darker and the older people went home to bed, she would let him hold her closer—if everything went well to that point.

And it did. Travis was a gentleman, staying with Carrie Lena between dances and not wandering

off to talk to some other boys about hunting and fishing. On the faster numbers, he kept his steps small and easy, so that neither of them was too hot and sweaty. And he walked with her up to the drug store to get a Coke when the band took a break. Carrie Lena, as critical as she was, had to admit that Travis treated her well. In the back of her mind she wondered how he expected to be treated, just how much reward did he expect for his gentlemanliness.

“Your cheatin’ heart...”

You could tell it was late when Country Jim started playing country lamentations.

The crowd had thinned out, and the average

*The more  
they danced,  
the gladder  
she was that  
she was with  
Travis and that  
Trevor had caught  
a fish hook in  
his mouth.*



age had dropped from about forty-five to twenty-five, and from that point on, the music would alternate between slow dance and a steamy blues for what could well have been a mating dance. The later it became, the closer Carrie Lena danced with Travis, resting her head on his shoulder and relishing how well his trim body fit hers. The more they danced, the gladder she was that she was with Travis and that Trevor had caught a fish hook in his mouth. As they danced she could feel her heart beating a little faster and her breathing quickening. She fitted her body more tightly against his.

"What time do you have to be home?" Travis whispered, as they almost motionlessly danced to "Only You." The saxophone sounded very lonely in the late-night air.

"Mama said I better be home by midnight," Carrie Lena whispered back. "But mama always says that. It'll be alright if I'm home by one o'clock."

"Maybe you'd like to take a ride in our new car?"

Carrie Lena sneaked a glance at her watch. It was 11:20. That would give them almost two hours together.

She just nodded her head into Travis' shoulder and pulled him just a little tighter.

When the song ended, they left the street holding hands, winding through the scattered remnants of the crowd. When they got back to the Rambler, Travis held the door open for Carrie Lena and—she thought—reluctantly turned loose of her hand.

They left the street lights of Congress and drove toward the country. The Rambler rode

smoother than any car Carrie Lena had ever been in. Travis turned the radio dial to the late-night record show from Raleigh. Roger Williams' "Autumn Leaves" was playing.

"What do you like to do?" Travis asked.

Carrie Lena wasn't sure just what he meant.

What would she like to do now? What would she be willing to let him do?

"What do you mean?"

"What do you like to do? Read? Listen to music? Just what do you like to do?"

"I don't know. I read magazines, mostly. And I like to listen to music. I like to go shopping in Raleigh, sometimes. What about you? What do you like to do? I guess you fish a lot, like Trevor."

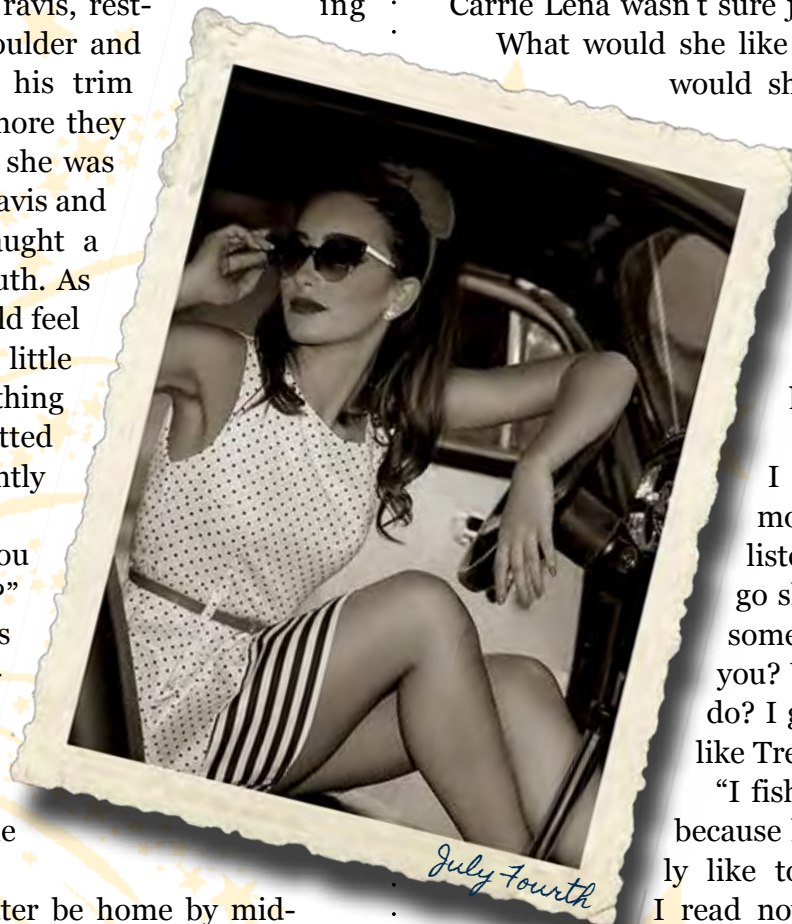
"I fish some, usually just because he wants to. I really like to read. Sometimes I read novels. Sometimes I read poetry."

Travis came to the place where the Four Oaks road was cut by the new Interstate that was being built. He pulled over beside a huge road scraper that was left from the day's grading.

"You mind if we stop here for a few minutes?"

Nobody had ever asked Carrie Lena if she minded parking before. Usually her dates just pulled into the parking spot; then they were all hands. But Carrie Lena was comfortable in handling those. She wasn't so comfortable being asked if she minded. But she knew that she didn't mind. She remembered how Travis had held her at the street dance, and the thought of him holding her again wasn't something she minded.

"No. I don't mind," she said, sliding just a little toward the middle of the seat, reaching



over and taking his hand.

"I've really enjoyed tonight," he said.

By the light of the nearly full moon Carrie Lena could see the small smile on Travis' face and the sparkle in his eyes. If Carrie Lena could have imagined a *Prince Charming*, he would have had the same smile and the same sparkle she saw there. She felt a surge of emotion that she really couldn't identify.

"I enjoyed it, too. You're a real good dancer."

"You think maybe we could go out again? Maybe to a movie or something?"

Oh, yes! Carrie Lena thought. *We can go anywhere you want to go.* But what she said was, "I think I'd like that."

Carrie Lena noticed that his hand still held hers. It hadn't moved. She also noticed that she was willing it to move, to reach up and touch her face or to stroke its fingers down her neck. Even to trace the slight curves of her body.

"I read a really interesting book this week," Travis said.

The concept of book and reading were so far from Carrie Lena's mind that all she could say was, "Oh?"

"It's written by a guy named George Orwell. It's called *Animal Farm*. Have you read it?"

For Carrie Lena, who read nothing but magazines and what the teachers said she absolutely had to read and report on, that wasn't a hard question.

"I don't think so," she said.

"Well, the next time I see you, I'll bring it. There are some parts of it I know you'd like."

Carrie Lena focused again on his hand holding hers, then on his lips. Why was he talking about books?

She pulled her hand so that his slid across her leg, and she felt the heat of it resting there.

She leaned toward him.

"The story in this book is about a bunch of animals that take over a farm and what happens to them, but it's really about what happened in Russia when the Communists took over. It's a satire."

Carrie Lena leaned a little closer to Travis, finally reaching over with her other hand and pulling his face toward her. Their lips touched, and she could feel her breathing quicken. The chasteness of the kiss surprised her; it caused her to lean closer to him, increasing the pressure

on their lips. She pressed his hand down into her leg. For once in her life, Carrie Lena wanted a boy to wrap himself around her and let her feel his body matched against hers.

She wanted the pace of his breathing to match hers.

Travis slowly pulled his lips back from hers, staring wide-eyed into her eyes.

"Wow!" he said, almost without sound.

"Yeah," she said. She wanted to tell him that she had never had a kiss like that.

"I think we better go," he said, pulling his hand away

from hers.

"I don't have to be home right yet," she said.

"But if we stay here, we might do something that we shouldn't do."

"What do you mean?" Carrie Lena said. Right then, she couldn't think of anything that she and Travis shouldn't do.

"Just something that's not right."

She couldn't think of anything that wouldn't be right. She wanted him to put his arms around her, pull her close and kiss her again. Then whatever happened happened.

"I've kissed some girls," he said, "but I don't think I've ever kissed one that kissed like you."

*"The story in this book is about a bunch of animals that take over a farm and what happens to them, but it's really about what happened in Russia when the Communists took over."*



“Did you like it?” she asked.

“Oh, yes. That’s the reason we need to go home. I liked it too much.”

“How can you like it *too* much? How can it be *too* good?”

Travis started the motor, turned on the headlights, and began to back out from under the shadow of the road scraper.

“I made myself a promise,” he said. “I promised that when I find the girl I’m going to marry, she’ll be the very first one.”

“First one *what*?”

“The first one that I was ever really close with.”

“But it’s going to be a long time before you get married.”

“Yes,” he said, as he pointed the Rambler down the Four Oaks Road back to Congress.

“But when I make a promise, I aim to keep it. I don’t think you could respect me if I didn’t. I couldn’t respect me.”

Carrie Lena leaned back in her seat, an aching in her body, staring at the passing white stripes in the middle of the road illuminated by the headlights of the car.



**Chuck Holmes**, who considers himself to be a part of the last generation of pure Southerners—pre-air conditioning and pre-TV, lives in Tucker, Georgia.





# Cloverine Salve-ation

by Stephen Hyder

**C**loverine Salve was my stake to riches, or so I thought. It was the late 1950's, and at eight or nine years old and living with my four brothers and parents in very rural Hawkins County, Tennessee, I suppose that I was weary of having to share all of the necessities of life with my *baby-boomer* siblings.

I wanted to compile my own resources. These were not my conscious thoughts, mind you. So I responded to an ad, most likely appearing in *Boys' Life Magazine*, which targeted Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts. "Sell Cloverine Salve," the ad promised, "and we will send you a free Signet Ring." I knew what a ring was but had no idea what "Signet" meant. And, I had no idea what I was getting into with the salve company.

A while later, a tubular package arrived in the mail, about three inches in diameter. One end of it was out-of-kilter and heavily secured with an abundance of masking tape. But it was addressed to me: "Steve Hyder, Route 4, Laurel Branch Road, Rogersville, Tenn." This was BZC (*Before the Zip Code*), and I retrieved

it from the mailbox out at the road.

Mom opened it up for me. The out-of-kilter end was opened, and on top of 12 tins of Cloverine Salve in the mailing tube was this little silver colored ring with a script "S" on it, malleable enough to size it by simply pushing the sides inward. Mom said that Cloverine Salve was a very old company which had been around for a long time, but I was anxious to make my fortune, so I hustled to get down Laurel Branch Road to the Pressmens Home Road to start knocking on doors to ply my trade, such as it was.

No success at the nearest neighbor's house, as no one was home, so I started walking up Horseshoe Bend to the little store on the



right. They weren't interested either. I had, by that point, exhausted my available customer-base. I had no other option and was forced to sideline my plans for immediate wealth. Then, I got into real trouble.

Dad came home from his law office one day and handed me a letter from the Cloverine Salve Company. I opened it and read it, but it made no sense to me. Dad (who knew what it was) obviously wanted to use the circumstances as a learning tool.

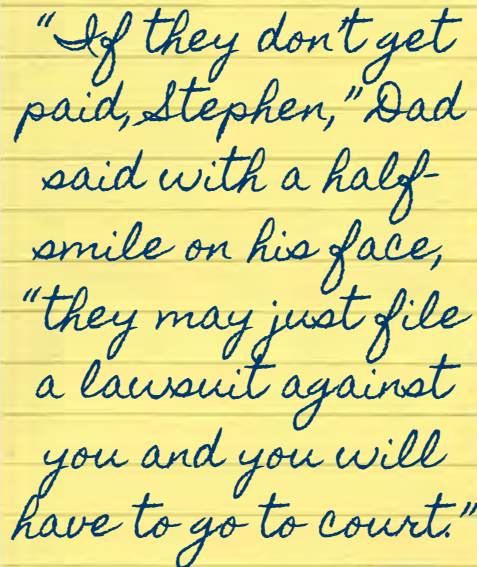
He told me that the Cloverine Salve people were demanding that I send them payment for the 12 tins of salve.

"If they don't get paid, Stephen," he said with a half-smile on his face, "they just may file a

lawsuit against you, and you will have to go to court." I was scared, and tears welled up in my eyes. I was also angry at Cloverine Salve, because I had no idea that something like this would be coming at me.

"I don't know what to do, Daddy," I sobbed.

Point made, Dad said he'd "see what he could do about it," and I never heard another thing about the matter. Mom later told me that Dad took care of it. But, we had an abundance of Cloverine Salve in our household for the next 30 years.



*"If they don't get paid, Stephen," Dad said with a half smile on his face, "they may just file a lawsuit against you and you will have to go to court."*



**Stephen Hyder** is an attorney in Maryville, Tennessee who writes infrequently on a wide variety of subjects.



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## Remembering Johnny Reb's

By Ron Burch



If you were a foodie in the fifties, Atlanta wasn't the place to be—that is unless you had a cast-iron stomach and a penchant for deep fried food. Drive-ins, short-order grills, delicatessens, cafeterias and greasy spoons that served the quintessential “meat ‘n three” owned the dining experience in the gateway city.

From Buckhead to Bankhead, College Park to Decatur, metro Atlanta was a place where burgers, barbecue, fried chicken, fried catfish and hush puppies, corn bread and overcooked vegetables reigned supreme.

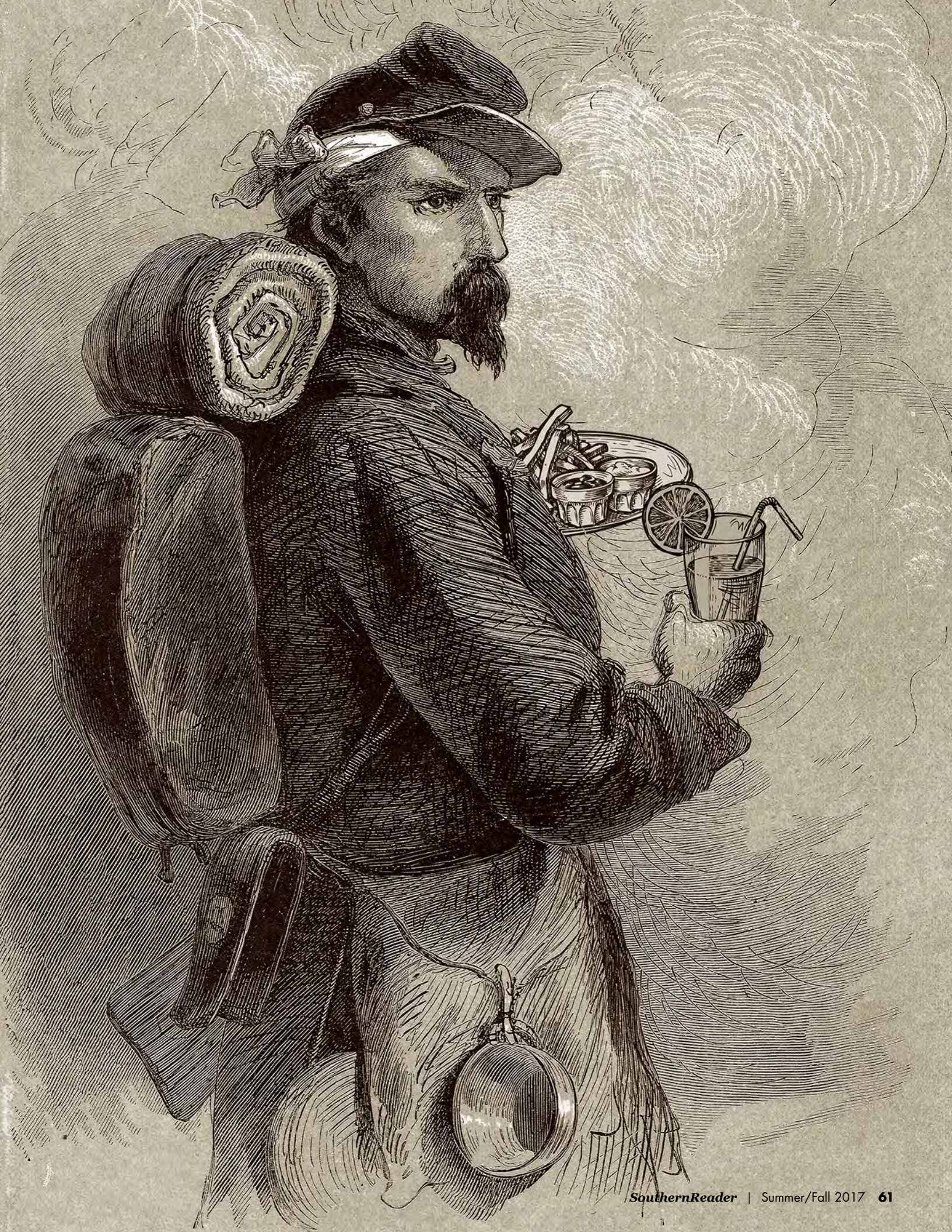
Rumor had it that there were a few “high-priced,” fine-dining restaurants in downtown Atlanta. Mostly in hotels. Places where they served adult beverages and aged beef and provided entertainment. However, we never went there. Back then, at least in my family, spending more than a buck-fifty on a meal out was considered a sacrilege.

Then *Johnny Reb's Dixieland* came upon the scene.

They built it atop a hill on US41, the road from Atlanta to Marietta—a hill that had served as an observation post during the Battle of Atlanta. They billed it as the “World's Largest Confederate Restaurant.” The building was fashioned like a 19th-century southern farmhouse. It had a wide porch that was lined all across the front with white wicker rocking chairs—rockers that provided a comfortable place to sit and wait until you were called to your table. Comfortable, that is as long as your growling stomach could deal with the amazing

*Back then,  
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than a buck-fifty  
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a sacrilege.*







aromas that found their way under the door out into the cool night air.

Inside, the décor and the memorabilia recreated the mood of the '60s—the 1860s, not the 1960s. The wait staff dressed in period costumes. The menu featured a variety of typical Southern dishes—fried chicken, pot roast and oven-roasted turkey; vegetables of all kinds, pot likker and chicken and dumplings. Nanny's pot pie and tater pie you couldn't eat with your shoes on!

After the Junior-Senior Prom and after my high school graduation, I took my date to Johnny Reb's. To me, it was a special place for special nights. Evenings made even more special by a true Southern gentleman named Graham Jackson.

Jackson hailed from Virginia. He was black. He was also a master musician that made wonderful music for over forty years.

Jackson served as a Petty Officer in the US Navy during World War II. He was President Franklin Roosevelt's "Official Entertainer." He made thirty command performances at the White House in Washington and at the "Little White House" in Warm Springs, Georgia.

In a classic *Life* magazine photo, a tearful Graham Jackson played Dvorak's "Going Home" on his accordion as Roosevelt's body departed Warm Springs aboard a crepe-draped train back to Washington. Later, Truman and Eisenhower also enjoyed his performances.

At Johnny Reb's, he sang; he talked; he

entertained. He played the piano, the accordion, the harmonica and a concert Hammond B3 organ—usually two at a time—combining his versatility, charm and gracious manner with an amazing musical virtuosity.

Each evening, tourists and natives alike crowded into the "*World's Largest Confederate Restaurant*" to hear Graham. After warming the crowd with his entertaining renditions of Southern songs, he'd take a break. When he returned, the graying Graham

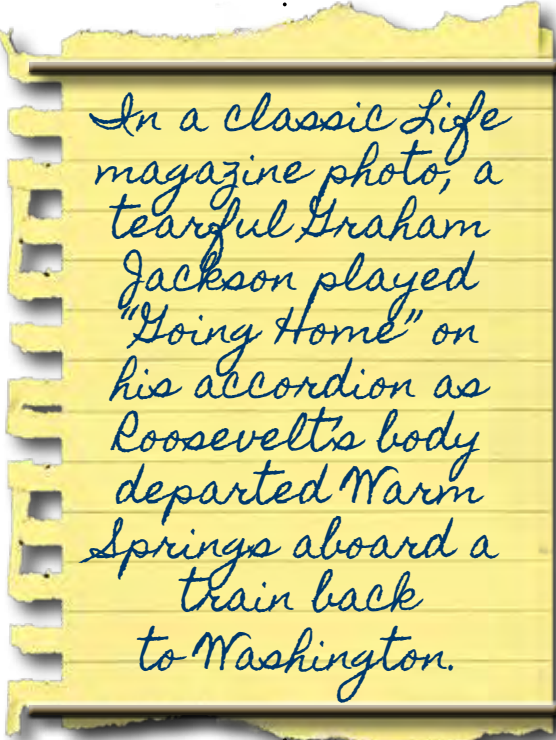
would slump slightly at the keyboard of the concert Hammond. The lights would dim. The first notes of the organ would sound. Diners would stop eating mid-course. Waiters would stop their scurrying around. The entire restaurant stilled. Another performance of "The Battle of Atlanta" was about to begin.

The story goes that the land is mountainous between Chattanooga and Atlanta, the foothills

of the Appalachian chain. The ground is hard; the terrain is rough. It was hard ground to make a living on in 1860; hard ground to wage a war on in 1865.

Graham's music takes you back. It weaves a spell. You can almost feel the hot Southern sun on your neck. You can see the red clay hills that stretch before you and disappear on the horizon.

Crash! There's cannon fire in the distance. Then, ever closer, a bugle calls. Sounds of the marching Union forces almost drown out the melody of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic."



*In a classic Life magazine photo, a tearful Graham Jackson played "Going Home" on his accordion as Roosevelt's body departed Warm Springs aboard a train back to Washington.*



The Union Army is strong and well-provisioned. But they are just as tired of the war as their ragged Southern counterparts.

Suddenly, the marching song of the Confederacy slices through the air. Southern spirits rise as they hear “Bonnie Blue Flag,” “Maryland, My Maryland,” and strains of “My Old Kentucky Home.” The armies skirmish. Jackson’s music takes the audience down the road toward Atlanta. Through Dalton, Resaca, Allatoona to Kennesaw and Cheatham’s Hill.

Soldiers fight and march. And fight and march. The artillery rumbles. The bombardment continues day and night. Yankee forces hurry behind Confederates retreating south.

Another year. A time for the necessities of war. “Taps” sounds as both sides bury their dead. Is this truly the last war fought by gentlemen? There are thoughts of home and loved ones. Tattered and torn, the soldiers are lost in reflection.

A sudden call to arms pierces the night. CHARGE! The battle rages. Cheers and cannons roar through the splash of tears and sting of muskets. Graham plays “Yankee Doodle” and “Dixie’s Land.” The wait staff whoops and yells. The cooks in the kitchen join in by banging their pots and pans together. They all shout and dance about.

The last shot dies. The organ fades away. The battle is over.

A silent moment or two later, the lights come back up. Jackson stands to hoots and

hollers and wild applause. He wipes his forehead with a crisp, white handkerchief. Diners wipe their eyes on greasy red-and-white checkered napkins. The waiters begin serving once again. It’s apple pie a la mode.

When I was a teenager, there wasn’t a better time to be had nor a better place to have it in than Johnny Reb’s. Who would have thought that in a few short years, society would turn on our Southern heritage? They called it racially insensitive. Johnny Reb’s closed.

*The Atlanta-Journal* dropped their front page slogan, “Covering Dixie like the Dew.” Objectors soon silenced the song “Dixie’s Land.”

But look at the words. There’s nothing in the song “Dixie’s Land” that should offend anyone.

*Oh I wish I was  
In the land of cotton,  
Old times there  
Are not forgotten,  
Look away! Look away!  
Look away, Dixieland.  
In Dixie’s land*

*Where I was born,  
Early on one frosty morn,  
Look away! Look away!  
Look away, Dixieland.  
“And I wish I was in Dixie, Away!  
Away! In Dixie’s land, I’ll take my stand,  
To live and die in Dixie.  
Look away! Look away!  
Look away down south in Dixie.  
“Well buckwheat cakes and a stony batter,  
Makes you fat or a little fatter,  
Look away! Look away!  
Look away, Dixieland.*

*When I was  
a teenager,  
there wasn't  
a better time  
to be had nor  
a better place  
to have it in than  
Johnny Reb's.*

*Here's a health to the next old missus,  
And all the gals that wants to kiss us,  
Look away! Look away!  
Look away, Dixieland.  
And I wish I was in Dixie, Hooray! Hooray!  
In Dixie's land, I'll take my stand,  
To live and die in Dixie.  
Look away! Look away!  
Look away down south in Dixie.  
Now if you want  
to drive away sorrow,  
Come and hear  
this song tomorrow,  
Look away! Look away!  
Look away, Dixieland.  
Then hoe it down and  
scratch your gravel,  
To Dixie's land,  
I'm bound to travel,  
Look away! Look away!  
Look away, Dixie land.  
And I wish I was in  
Dixie, Hooray! Hooray!  
In Dixie's land,  
I'll take my stand,  
To live and die in Dixie.  
Look away! Look away!  
Look away down south in Dixie.*

Today we're losing the last remnants of our Southern heritage. Statues, plaques, and any mementos honoring the heroes of Dixie's land are being removed from our public squares. Why? Because opponents of our culture fail to understand us and the nature of our ways.

Southerners are a conservative people. We prefer the traditional to the abstract. We're slow to adopt new theories. We don't approve of racism, racial epitaphs or bigotry, but we revere our agrarian past and the old traditions. We love the brave sons of the South that fought and died in the battles of Sharpsburg

and Manassas, Shiloh, Harper's Ferry, Vicksburg, Gettysburg, Allatoona, Peachtree Creek and 376 others. It ain't about the "Stars and Bars." It's about those cotton fields back home.

The world that I grew up in accepted Southerners and Southern heritage as a positive part of America. It's a world that began fading a half-century ago and now thanks to political correctness and misplaced loyalties, it's almost gone.

In 2017, Atlanta hosts thousands of restaurants, many of the five-star variety. You can still find food from the fifties at the retro joints, the Waffle House and at a few other "meat 'n three" holdouts.

But Graham Jackson won't be there. And you won't hear the concert Hammond or a tinny-sounding honky-tonk piano playing "Dixie's Land." You may, however,

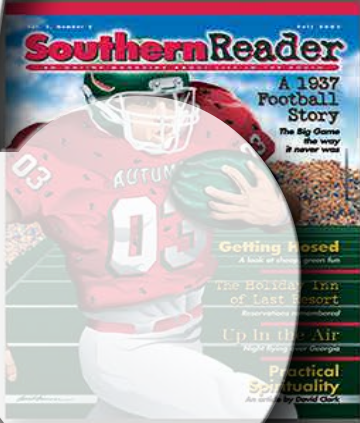
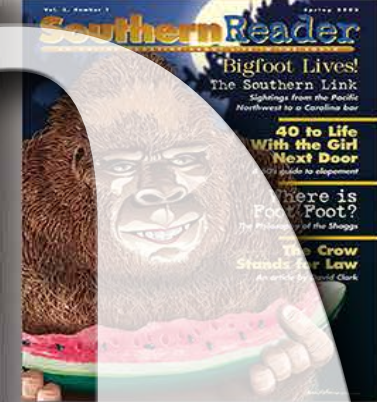
hear someone from "somewhere up north" ordering a grinder and criticizing the South—someone not smart enough to realize that living in the Old South—or for that matter, the New South—was and is about as good as it gets.

There's a saying in the South: "American by birth—Southern by the grace of God." To that, I say "Amen."



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





# SouthernReader

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