

Issue Number Twenty-One

Summer/Fall 2018

Southern Reader

AN ONLINE MAGAZINE FROM THE SOUTH

444 Days

A WWII POW story

Out of Hand

Grocery store terror

Ghost Stories

Southern folklore comes alive

The Fisherman

A short story

Steel Magnolias

The modern-day version(s)

Party with A Little 'P'

Lisa Love's life

Joining the 'Club'

Scouts' honor

Saucers in the Valley

Southern sci-fi fiction

Compassionate Warrior

A child's fight with cancer

daniel hanner



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Das Rockabilly Pig

By David Ray Skinner

No one gets to choose the circumstances, time, or place of their birth, but I do believe that, had I been given a choice, I would have picked Nashville, 1952, all over, again.

I mean, good grief, what's not to like? How lucky can a kid (that loves country music) get? Then again, maybe that's *why* I love country music—so, I guess you have to ask yourself, which came first, *the chicken* or *the pedal steel*?

I was born on a hot, hot summer Sunday late afternoon/early evening in a downtown Nashville hospital, a few blocks from the Ryman (sounds like a country song, doesn't it?) where only the night before, the stage had been occupied by Hank Williams, Hank Snow, Bill Monroe, Ernest Tubb, Cowboy Copas, the Carter Sisters, and Roy Acuff.

That Sunday, the *Nashville Tennessean* complained about it being the longest period of drought and record heat for the region in June. Truman was still president and, meanwhile, Ike was busy stumping across Texas, trying to shore up his chances in the upcoming 1952 Presidential election that November.

The folks took me home from the hospital to our little

I was born on a hot, hot summer Sunday in a downtown Nashville hospital, a few blocks from the Ryman, where only the night before, the stage had been occupied by a host of now famous stars.

house on Vultee Blvd., named after the Vultee Aircraft Plant that was built during the war to manufacture *Vengeance* dive bombers, which were initially supplied to England's RAF in their air war against Germany.

My first memories are from that little house, and they're mostly foggy glimpses of the bottom of chairs and tables. The one piece of furniture that does stand out, however, was our old Motorola cabinet black-and-white TV. I couldn't see under it, but I do remember the cloth covering the speaker (that would have been eye-level to a crawling Nashville tot). What I loved most of all were the cartoons that jumped out of that old TV screen and into the hot living room on Vultee Blvd. And, the cartoon character that immediately comes to mind was not a Disney, Warners, or MGM cartoon star. Rather, it was the *Rockabilly Pig*, the spokesman (or should I say, *spokespig*?) for Jacobs Preferred (hot dogs, sausage and ham).

Jacobs Preferred was a brand produced by Jacobs Packing Company, a meat-packing company founded in the ruins of the civil war in Nashville, in 1870 by William Jacobs. Jacobs, originally from Wittenburg, Germany, was able to convince the posh Maxwell House Hotel (as in Maxwell House Coffee) to add his special Spice Round ham to their winter menu. That, in turn, encouraged a number of meat-packing companies (from Germany and other European nations) to relocate to America and Nashville in particular, all hoping to emulate his success.

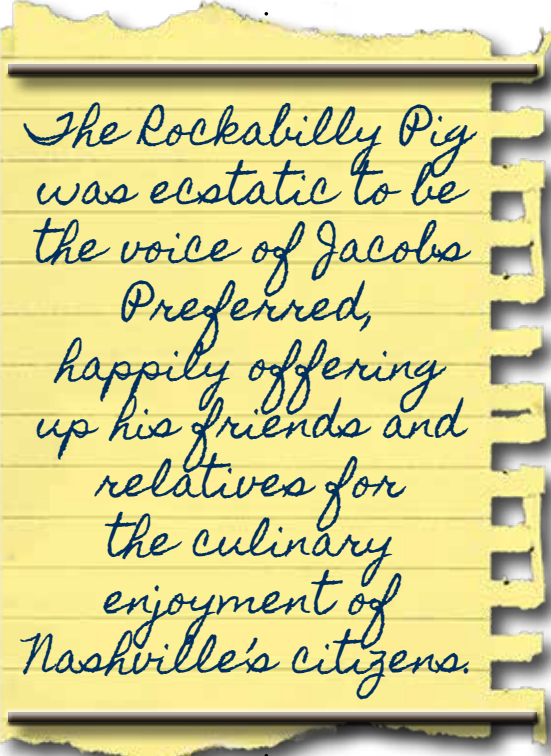
If you fast forwarded eighty years, that same sleepy Tennessee town on the Cumberland River was the musical landing zone and melting pot of pickers coming west from Appalachia and east from Texas and

Oklahoma. The mountain pickers from the east were fueled by the high lonesome songs of musicians like (the afore-mentioned) Roy Acuff, Bill Monroe and the Carter Family; the western swingers rocked to the beat of band leaders like Bob Wills and Spade Cooley. The resulting high-octane, hybrid mix of these musical influences began taking shape in the early '50s in Memphis and became known as "rockabilly," a portmanteau of "rock" (from "rock 'n' roll") and "hillbilly." Led by young upstarts such as Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, and Johnny and Dorsey Burnette, to name a few, it quickly spread to Memphis' sister city, Nashville, and to the rest of post-war America, as well as the world at large.

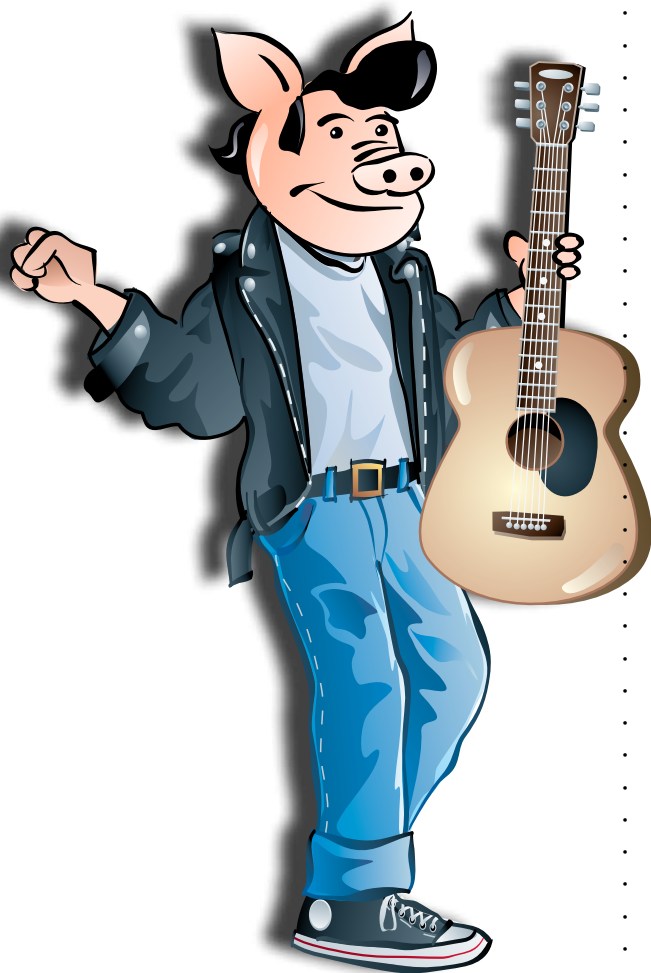
Enter the *Rockabilly Pig*. He had sideburns, pegged pants, a T-shirt with rolled-up sleeves and low-slung guitar. At least, that's how I remember him as he danced his way across the screen of our old Motorola. There's one thing I am sure of—he was ecstatic to be the voice of Jacobs Preferred, happily offering up his friends and relatives for the culinary enjoyment

of Nashville's citizens in their kitchens and dining rooms and in restaurants and diners throughout the city and state.

It had been less than a decade since our fathers (and mothers) had defeated the Germans and the Japanese, and, looking back, I believe that the children who had been born during that war (who were then teens) were blissfully ignorant of what their parents had endured. In fact, they were happy just to *rockabilly* the night away at their high school hops, and maybe stop by the drive-in on the way home for a shake and a Jacobs Coney, an outstanding wiener manufactured by the



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The description of a Jacobs Coney was: "A special blend of the best pork and beef, seasoned with honey, butter, and imported spices."

descendants of that ol' German meat-packer, William Jacobs. One newspaper ad described a *Jacobs Coney* as being a *special blend of the best pork and beef, seasoned with honey, butter, and imported spices*. I'm guessing that description was created by the same Nashville advertising genius who thought it would be cool to have Elvis Porcine peddling pork (say that quickly three times).

Okay...so where am I going with this narrative? Here's the thing—I think that at some juncture in time, all of the points of the universe converge. Okay, maybe not all of them, but at least a few, so bear with me here. When I started assembling this issue of *SouthernReader*, I reached out to Joe Holbert, my good friend, former fraternity brother and co-member of *The Dog & Pony Band*, which often plays "Rockabilly Pig" in concert. I encouraged Joe and his son to submit the account of his father's experience as a WWII prisoner of war. Joe's father, Kyle Holbert, was aboard a B17 bomber, when it was shot down. Although he was injured, he survived and spent 444 days in various German prisons. The article was written by Joe's son, Christopher, and it's an amazing story of faith, survival and patriotism. It appears in this issue, along with a link to the accompanying song, "444 Days: A Song for Dad," that was written by Joe and his wife, Karen.

A few days after I laid out Chris's article, I got a call from a blogger named Peter, who was calling from Germany. Peter has a rockabilly blog and *YouTube* channel and was wanting to know if I knew anything about an obscure, but sultry, rockabilly artist named Gin Gillette (her "*Train to Satanville*" is particularly interesting). Peter had read the article in *SouthernReader* about Dallas Frazier, and he explained that Dallas had been on the same record label as Gin Gillette. However, as it turned out, neither Dallas (nor I) knew anything about Ms. Gillette or what had happened to her or her rockabilly career.

For that matter, neither of us know what happened to the Rockabilly Pig, either. The only mention of him I could find (while browsing through old Nashville newspapers) was in a Jacobs Preferred ad from a 1957 issue of the *Nashville Tennessean*. "Name the Pig!" it cried, and the winner would be eligible to win "a German Volkswagen Automobile" (if only I had been old enough to suggest "Elvis Porcine").

Hopefully, Gin missed the train to Satanville, and the Rockabilly Pig escaped the frying pan. I'd like to think that they're both relaxing in a chalet, high in the (German) Alps, living off their respective royalties, oblivious to the ever-changing fickleness of our societal whims and the constant ebb-and-flow of our so-called culture.

[Click here to hear "Rockabilly Pig."](#) 

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Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

I recently finished reading the 20th issue of "SouthernReader" all the way through and enjoyed it. It was fun to re-read Iggy-dew's story about her dad's ashes. Glad you brought it to the surface where new viewers can appreciate it. Same applied to Lisa Love's story about her "rat" (terrier). I love the part about the false teeth.

The rest of the articles are all real good. Niles Reddick's account of the "Mud Island Monorail," probably more than my own personal nerves would have stood. I never could do heights, let alone with complications. Mud Island sounds like it would be an interesting place to visit. I didn't know it existed, worldly as I am, so "SouthernReader" is an enlightening e-mag, as well as entertaining!

Marshall Lancaster's story certainly had a surprise ending! Who'da thought? It's not hard to understand how that episode has stayed with him for a lifetime! I personally think Alan was a regular blackguard.

Ben Hunt has a right to be proud of his granddad. I can remember watching those early rocket launches on TV. My maternal grandfather was one who swore they were done in Hollywood. He should have met Granddad Hunt. My dad's dad (Pappy) was about as sober as a truck bumper, but I have missed him more than anyone else in this world until I lost my dad. Both were nobodies in the grand scheme of things but to me they were a far cut above. Honest, hard working and old-fashioned. Actually, Pappy wasn't old-fashioned. He was just old and, thankfully, never changed with the times. Nor did my dad, living next door to his folks...nor I, living in the middle of them all, but there you go, I'm off on another tangent. My hat goes off to J.B. Hunt. The world can't have too many J.B. Hunts.

The story about the hitch-hiker--good as usual. But, off the subject again, my first vehicle was a Volkswagen (like in the article). Not a bus, but a '64 bug--close enough to bring back memories. Unlike the bus in the story, "Van Go," I had no name for my Volkswagen, though. I eventually wrecked it on a back road going to work one Saturday morning. Crawled out the windshield. Couldn't do that today. Too fat. And I broke my sternum. I suppose I could still do that. I wound up swapping it to a fellow for a pair of motocross boots. He took it down to the frame and rebuilt it using sheet metal. When it was done, it looked more like a Kubelwagen--all right angles; no curves; no top; no doors. Sort of like a metal Kleenex box that certainly weighed a ton.

It could have been used in the "Combat" series on TV back in the 60's. But those old Volkswagens were the best. I bought another one a few years later. Both mine had their seats anchored. Found out they're not good for dating, but we'll not go there.

"Cloverine Salve-ation" is another good story that brings back a memory. Years ago, I jokingly told Eric, our youngest, that he could consider himself "course superintendent." One day he answered a phone call and was asked by a telemarketer if he could speak to the superintendent. Eric told the fellow he was the very man and okayed their wish to make us a website "for only thirty-some dollars a month." When I got the confirmation in the mail, I called the company and asked what the meaning of it was. They told me a representative had spoken with the superintendent who'd okayed it. I asked just who it was that claimed to be the superintendent. "Said his name was Eric" (you have to be careful what you say to kids!) So I explained to the man on the other end that Eric was an 11-year-old-boy who had no more say-so in my business than the man in the moon. Both my son and Mr. Hyder meant well, but sometimes youth can cause ripples even when the heart is in the right place.

Ron Burch's article was good; the important thing he had to say had little to do with fancy restaurants, but rather about the mess this country's mentality is in. Or am I wrong? It appears that narrow-mindedness closed down the Johnny Reb. Okay. As unfortunate as it was to close it down, it was also as good a way as any for Mr. Burch to lead up to his stump speech, only he didn't carry it far enough. With his talent for writing, had I been behind him, I would have pushed him to extrapolate on the subject. His message is profound. Will it do any good? It hasn't coming from anyone else so I'll guess not. But at least he voiced his opinion and dropped the hint. And he's also made it plain that you can get a better meal in the Atlanta area today as opposed to 50 years ago, unless you ate at Johnny Reb's or liked deep-fried food.

I wish you and your magazine well; take care and have a good day.

Yours truly,

Doug Combs

P.S. Thanks for dropping your "Letters to the Editor" department...the letters were usually written by some pompous windbag, and they never ceased to bore me to tears.



Party With a Little 'P'

a childhood memoir by Lisa Love

I

am sitting in the middle of a lake while waves gently lap at the side of my boat. Pure peace washes over me. Just then the boat starts to tilt—it's taking on water.

I frantically try to right the boat—water inches up past my ankles. We are going down, surrounded by the dark, cold water. I quit struggling, relax and let go, sinking. Peaceful oblivion. I wish! Startled and wet, I wake up. My one coherent thought: "Oh no, not here. Not tonight! Please Lord, just let the earth open up and swallow me now!" What a shame, too—this day had started with such promise!

April 17, 1969. It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. I was eight years old and floating on Cloud Nine (at least initially), because I was going to be in a wedding. I remember twirling around in my brand-new, mint-green dress, wearing my shiny, black patent-leather shoes. Mama braided my hair as she whispered in my ear how lovely I was going to look carrying my bouquet of flowers, walking down the aisle. Visions of grandeur were swirling around in my head. For all of my nervous excitement you would have thought I was the bride! (At eight

My one coherent thought was "Oh no, not here. Not tonight! Please Lord, just let the earth open up and swallow me now!"

years old? Hello, this wasn't West Virginia!) No, I was going to be the flower girl at my mama's wedding.

Therein lies the rub. Now mind you, I was totally looking forward to this wedding. From my child's eye, it sounded pretty much like a big ol' party to me. All of our friends and relatives were coming, and most importantly, there was gonna be cake. I'd go anywhere that there was even a hint of a promise of a slice of cake.

So I was tickled with the idea of the wedding; it was just the whole "Make Room for Stepdaddy" part of this program that I was having trouble wrapping my eight-year-old mind around. I couldn't shake

this feeling that some seismic shifts were getting ready to occur in my world! Best of times, worst of times? Yup.

To understand my misgivings, you'd have to understand that I'd had it really good up until that moment. I came into this world the much-beloved mascot on a team that had weathered some pretty rough times (of which I would remain completely oblivious).

I entered the scene after the dust of divorce had settled; bitterness and recriminations were becoming faint memories, yet the loss and bewilderment that had touched the hearts of my older brother and sister was still a bit raw. Mama and Daddy's divorce became final right after I was born. The way I heard tell it, my Dad had been in the Navy, and Mom said they got along beautifully, as long as he was out at sea. He would pen volumes of the most beautiful love letters to her, describing the world and all of his adventures in it. Mama would write

back to him that all was fine at home, and the weather was nice. I can only assume that I got my love of words from him. They were both wonderful people separately, but a mismatch together from the start. Different temperaments, different faiths...and *shall I say it?* Yes, I must. He was a *Yankee*...born and bred! 'Nuff said.

After 11 years of marriage and two children, they decided to call it quits. Oops, *not so fast*. After they separated, Mama found out that she was pregnant with me. My sister Debbie actually takes credit for that. She said she would sit in the bathroom when she was a little girl, crying her eyes out and praying to God for Him to give her a precious little sister of her own to love.

And miracles of miracles, I arrived!

Of course, she also says that after I was born, she went back into that bathroom, crying her eyes out and praying for Him to take me back, as obviously there had been some horrible miscommunication on her part. I can only assume a wailing, colicky newborn was not exactly what she had in mind. As I always tell her, maybe she should have been a wee more specific when petitioning Our Lord in prayer.

Before I was born, Mama and my brother and sister moved back home with my mama's parents, Nana and Granddaddy, who, along with my mama, were the most precious people on the face of God's green earth. At a time when they should have been enjoying their *Golden Years*, they wholeheartedly took to starting life all over again with kids and a new baby on the way. Mama and my grandparents bought a lovely house in Suburbia, and with love and

They were both wonderful people separately, but a mismatch together from the start. Different temperaments, different faiths...and shall I say it? Yes, I must. He was a Yankee...born and bred!

determination, they set about to make it our home. I was welcomed home from the hospital into *pert-near Utopia!*

When I was older, my Nana would tell me that some people might have thought my birth was an accident or not the best timing in the world, but my arrival restored hope and laughter to my family. Mind you, I never got a big head from all of this attention...I mean—I was not under any delusions that I was the little Messiah come to save my family. No, I was just totally doted on by them all, and believe me, the feeling was decidedly mutual. I adored

my mama, loved my grandparents and pretty much hero-worshipped my big brother and sister.

I was somewhat awestruck being the “baby” in a multi-generational home, mainly because at any given moment of any given day, someone in that family adored me! Not all at once, mind you.

I was, after all, a kid, and kids will be kids...meaning, I could be, in turn, charming, annoying, adorable, entertaining, or sometimes, just plain rotten! But for every second that someone in that house was annoyed with me, there was someone else that thought I hung the moon. Yeah, *life was sweet!*

Being raised a good Southern girl, I was taught to love God and Country (*in that order, thank you*), respect my elders, and be in church every time those doors opened. Who would have ever predicted that it would be in that very same Independent Southern Baptist Church that the world as I knew it would be rocked. For it was at that very same church that my

sweet Mama met the man that she would marry that fateful night in 1969.

He was a gentle, handsome man that had tried in vain to get Mom’s attention for quite some time, but Mama had no intention of going down that road again (*Honey, she invented the phrase “Been there, done that, got the video”*). In fact, until I was seven years old, Mama had never once ventured into the dating world. She went to work, came home, tended the house and us kids, then went to church on Sundays.

She had so completely devoted her life to us that you can only imagine my “shock and awe” when she finally agreed to go with this man to Dunkin’ Dine for coffee after prayer meeting. Thank goodness she had the good sense to take me with her whenever they went out. I am sure this thrilled him to no end. They would sit and talk over coffee and pie about the preacher’s message while I sat across from them in the little booth eating (what else?) cake.

I can only assume that my future stepfather used some kind of Jedi mind control over me, because I started looking forward to “our” little “dates.” Eventually, he started coming to our house for Sunday supper. I must admit, he was a wonderfully-talented musician, able to play the guitar and the harmonica beautifully. He also had a way with a story, sometimes making me laugh so hard milk would fly out my nose (I guess I always had a little trouble controlling my fluids).

Like water on a rock, he slowly wore me down and won me over with humor, music, and cake. Smart man. Then one day, Mama asked my brother and my sister and me what we thought

*I was, after all,
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about her marrying *HIM*. I didn't really see the point—weren't we all happy just the way it was? I mean, I liked him alright and all, but even at eight, I could tell he didn't light up quite as brightly as the rest of my family did when I walked into a room.

I knew he liked me well enough, but I was pretty sure he didn't *ADORE* me. While my family had always found me precious, I had the sneaky suspicion he thought I was a little more like *precocious* (if I had known that word at the time!). But, wanting Mama to be happy, and with a quivering hope that maybe it would be kinda cool to be like all of my other friends' families (mom, dad, 2.5 kids and a dog), I gave a tentative blessing to this union.

As the weeks passed, I started to get a little excited as the wedding plans unfolded (every girl loves a party). It was decided that I would be the aforementioned flower girl, my brother would be a groomsman, and my sis would be the maid of honor! *Coolio!* Then the wheels came off this wedding bus the moment I heard Mama and my Nana talking about the honeymoon.

Honeymoon...*well, this came out of left field!* They were discussing hotel arrangements, and I piped up asking where we were going. Imagine my absolute disbelief when I was informed that I wouldn't be going anywhere. *What?* Hey, hadn't I been a part of this whole shindig up till now? See, Mama had never been away from home without us before, so there was some major separation anxiety swirling around in my little head. But, Nana told me that we would have loads of fun while Mama was away, and then she reminded me that I had my best friend, Elaine's slumber party to go to right

after the wedding anyway.

It was Elaine's 10th birthday party, and reminding me of it didn't exactly allay my anxiety. When spending the night away from home, I had a tendency to get a little homesick when it was time for bed. At home, after Mama fell asleep, I could tiptoe down the hall and crawl into Nana and Granddaddy's bed to watch Johnny Carson with them until I fell asleep.

As the big day approached, my trepidations grew threefold;

First, I was getting a step-daddy (was that good or bad? I just didn't know yet, but I knew our family dynamics would surely change). Secondly,

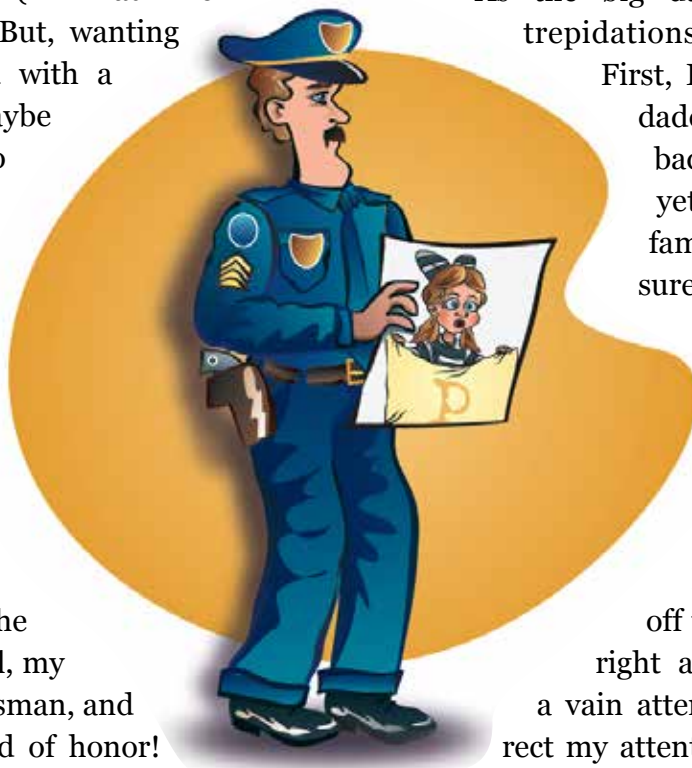
Mama was going on a vacation, or Honeymoon, if ya will, without me (ouch!) And thirdly, I kinda felt

I was being sprinted off to this slumber party right after the wedding in a vain attempt to try and redirect my attention from the above-mentioned number one and number

two trepidations.

When the big day arrived, with love in my heart for my mama and my family, I decided to be brave and face the unknown with all the courage my little eight-year-old self could muster. I kept my head high, held my flowers proudly, and flashed a hope-filled, if somewhat tremulous, smile at my mom. She was my role model, my hero, and my soft spot to land in a hard world! We had always been a team; we always would be. Maybe we had just recruited another player.

I got through the ceremony just fine (*it was lovely by the way, thank you for asking*), but at the reception, I started getting a little nervous



thinking about Mom's imminent departure and about this whole slumber party thingee. Watching Mom and Stepdad pose for pictures, I started throwing back cup after cup of punch—drowning my sorrows in lime sherbet punch, I suppose. With my insides sloshing, there was certainly no room for cake! *Who'd a-thunk it?*

Finally, it was time for the newlyweds to make their exit. Before I could burst into tears as I watched *that Man* drive away with my Mama, Aunt Barbara (who also happened to be Elaine's mother) put her arm around me and directed me into her car. I told her I needed to get my suitcase, but she told me it had already been put in the trunk.

Talk about a quick getaway—honey, they had me out of there in a flash. Were they really afraid I was gonna grab onto the bumper of Mama's car and let myself be dragged along the streets of Atlanta to the secret honeymoon location? Please!!! Well, actually I had thought of that, but the roadburn alone would have killed me long before we made it to the hotel.

So, off we went, Aunt Barbara and me, to Decatur for my first official slumber party. By the way, Aunt Barbara was not really my aunt, but, *schooling ya in all things Southern*, when a lady is a life-long friend of your mama's, she is crowned with the *Unofficial Aunt* title. She had been Mom's best friend for well over 20 years, and she loved me like one of her own. As we got to her house, I asked who else from Church would be there, and she said I was the only one from Church coming to the party; the other eight girls were all from Elaine's class at school. Oh Lord, could this night get any worse?

(Stay tuned—*IT DEFINITELY COULD!!!*).

Elaine and I didn't go to the same school, so I wouldn't know any of the other girls there. *Oh that's just swell...* I was to spend the night with eight veritable strangers. I'd have to pretend to be interested as they gossiped about people I don't know, all the while, in the back of my mind I'd be worried sick about my Mom. At this point, I was starting to think that we didn't really know a lot about this guy who just took my mom away. Shouldn't we have done a background check on him?! You know, Ted Bundy seemed really nice

at first, too. Oh, what had we gotten ourselves into? If you had looked up the definition of *anxiety* in the dictionary at this point, you'd have found my stricken face staring back at ya!

After some awkward first moments of trying to get everyone's name straight, it wasn't really so bad after all.

The ice was broken a bit by making prank phone calls, painting our toenails, drinking sodas, eating popcorn, and watching old movies on TV

(this was pre-VCR players and DVD's, so it was slim pickin's). But even though I was still the outsider in the bunch, I think they all kinda liked me. I have always had a tendency to grow on people (yeah, just like an antibiotic-resistant fungus, *I know, I know!*).

I'd had a rather busy day, with the wedding and all the drama surrounding it, so when midnight came and it was time for bed, I didn't even mind. I was actually kinda sleepy. All ten of us crawled into Elaine's queen-size bed like a litter of kittens (or a family in the afore-mentioned West Virginia). I was snugly nestled in the middle of the pack, surrounded by arms, legs, heads and feet. The lights were

Shouldn't we have done a background check on him?! You know, Ted Bundy seemed really nice at first, too.

all turned out, and I can still remember the moonlight shining in through the window, throwing shadows onto the walls.

I finally started settling in, not to the comforting familiar sounds of Johnny Carson in the background, but of absolute silence, broken only occasionally by the sound of a few girls snoring. I began to drift off to sleep, but not before wondering what my Mama was doing (I am glad at eight years old that I had absolutely NO IDEA about anything in that department, or I would have had to poke out my mind's eye with a rusted grapefruit spoon). *Good night and God Bless us everyone!*

I awoke with a start about three hours later. And yes, my first coherent thought really was, "*Oh Lord, not here, not tonight! Please let the earth open up and swallow me whole!*" Rest assured, at about this time I was rethinking all those glasses of punch and sodas I had downed earlier because *I HAD WET THE BED!*

And I don't mean I just wet the bed, I mean I soaked it like I was a human soaker hose.

Oh why couldn't I have just been at home in my own bed when this calamity occurred? But, NO, I had just peed on eight *Strangers!* I can't really say for sure that it would have been any better or made that much of a difference if I had just peed on friends, but come on, *STRANGERS!!*

Help me, Lord! I was frantic at this point, absolutely frantic. My mind raced; I could hear my heartbeat pounding in my ears (so loudly that it almost, but not quite, drowned out the voices in my head). RUN! ESCAPE!

MUST GET OUT OF HERE! This was the litany going 'round and 'round in my head. I tried desperately to think clearly and to assess the damage. Ever so gingerly I checked out the girl on my left—Sara, I think—or *was her name Michelle?* Or *Patty?* Oh heaven help me, it just seems the height of rudeness not to know the names of the girls you have just peed on, doesn't it?

Well, whoever she was, she was soaked. I checked out the girl to my right. Let's just call her *Stephanie*. Ditto. Soaked. And she didn't smell too great either, come to think of it.

When we went to bed, I had thought how sweetly we resembled a sleeping litter of kittens; now they were going to wake up thinking they'd slept in the litter box. ESCAPE! MUST ESCAPE!! I crawled over the mass of sleeping bodies (couldn't help but notice that it wasn't just the girls right next to me that had gotten drenched. No sir, my *Super Pee* had made it out to about three girls deep on each side of me. *Stupid punch!* The sheet was waterlogged and so were we.

I quietly untangled myself from the sleeping girls and made my way off the bed. *ESCAPE! MUST GET OUT OF HERE!* I crawled on my hands and knees on a cold, CREAKY, hardwood floor making my way to the bedroom door. I VERY SLOWLY pulled the door open and slithered out of the room (or should I say swam out of the room?)

I used my hands to navigate the walls of the hallway till I found the table where the phone was (this would not have been nearly as hard if cellphones had just been invented already).

My heart was pounding so loudly that I was sure it would wake the house. I lifted the

Oh why couldn't I have just been at home in my own bed when this calamity occurred? But, NO, I had just peed on eight Strangers!

receiver and started to dial the rotary phone. Of course, our home number was rife with nines and zeros. The clickety-click sound of the dial was deafening to me. This was taking forever! *PLEASE! PLEASE DON'T LET ANYONE WAKE UP! I PEED ON STRANGERS* (like the voice in my head thought that I had forgotten that delicious morsel of news)!!!

The phone was ringing. My granddaddy answered. I hoarsely whispered, "Come get me NOW!"

Lord love him, he didn't even question why. He just said he was on his way! Then, I had to make it down the stairs without making a sound. I slid down on my butt, one stair at a time (probably leaving a wet trail behind me). Finally, I bumped my way down to the last step, crawled across the foyer floor and struggled to unlock the front door. It wouldn't budge.

PLEASE!!! I stopped my struggling for a minute to assess my situation. *I PEED ON STRANGERS!* Okay, got that already. My suitcase and my eyeglasses were still up in Elaine's room. Leave 'em! Those girls upstairs were going to eventually wake up, and they were going to notice that I was gone and that they smelled like ammonia! Well, I couldn't worry about that at that particular moment, I just knew I didn't want to be there when that happened. *MUST GO!!! ESCAPE!!!* I couldn't even imagine what they would think, but I was pretty sure I wrecked any chances of us all becoming BFF'S. *Stupid punch!!!*

Oh my Lord, sure, I had assumed there might be some repercussions coming after last night, but was it really an arrestable offense?

Embarrassment and shame flooded my heart. I was humiliated and I just wanted to run home. *SANCTUARY!!!* I saw Granddaddy's headlights in their driveway, and I pushed on the lock one last time with all my strength, and it gave way. I opened the door, and it creaked loudly. Bit-by-bit, I inched my way out onto the porch. I didn't even push the door closed. Too much noise. I ran to the car, threw my arms around Granddaddy's neck and cried. He didn't ask any questions; he could see I was wet and the smell was pretty much unavoidable.

I remember cuddling up next to him on that big bench seat (there weren't any seatbelt laws to protect me back then).

He didn't mind that I was getting his pajama bottoms wet and stinky (yes, he came to get me in his pajamas) or that

I was probably ruining his car's upholstery.

He told me everything always seems better in the light of day after a good night's rest. He knew how tired and utterly miserable his

little girl was. I rested my head on his shoulder. We were the only car on the road at that time of the night; Glenn Miller played softly on the radio.

When we drove into the garage, Granddaddy picked me up and carried me into the house where he got me cleaned up and in dry p.j.'s. He then took me into the kitchen and fixed me his famous toasted homemade pimento cheese sandwich (not only a southern delicacy, a *Granddaddy-and-Lisa* tradition).

We were both bone-tired, and I don't remember a lot of conversation—just him patting my hand and smiling while I finished my snack. When we were done, we crawled into bed with Nana. She woke, and Granddaddy

assured her that in the morning he would fill her in. I cuddled between the two of them. Safe. Secure. Unconditionally loved. I felt so much better right then that I even hoped Mama was having a good time and not missing me too terribly—and maybe I had overreacted.

Maybe it wasn't as bad as it had seemed at the time. It was, after all, just an accident, right? NO, *I PEED ON STRANGERS!!!* Yeah, it was still really bad! But I went to sleep with Nana and Granddaddy each holding my hands. I was dreaming again. *Oh No.*

This time I heard a doorbell ringing and the pounding of a door. And had I heard a phone earlier? Phones weren't in bedrooms back then, so if it had rung, it certainly hadn't jarred us out of our deep sleep. But the persistent knocking on the door was not subsiding, nor was it a dream after all.

Granddaddy finally got up and made his way to the front door. I peered around the hallway to see what was what. As he opened the door, I saw two policemen. POLICEMEN?! Oh my Lord, sure, I had assumed there might be some repercussions coming after last night, *BUT WAS IT REALLY AN ARRESTABLE OFFENSE???*

My stomach clenched into a huge knot, and I was pretty sure that pimento cheese sandwich was going to be making a reappearance. Jail? *JAIL?!* I didn't know if they were at the front door because *I PEED ON STRANGERS*, or because I left the scene of the crime.

My knees were shaking as the policeman continued to talk to my granddad. You know, at eight, my only real concept of prison was from the *Andy Griffith Show*. Mayberry had a two-cell jail and Otis, the town drunk, was pretty much a regular in it. As I was pondering what my cell might look like and if all the other prisoners would be as friendly as Otis appeared to be, Granddaddy called me to the front door.

One of the officers told me that my Aunt

Barbara had been scared to death when she woke up and found me gone. She told them that my suitcase was right where I had left it and the front door was standing wide open when they all got up. When she couldn't get anyone to answer our phone here at home, she felt it was her duty to call the police department and report me as kidnapped.

Waves of emotion flooded over me all at once. First, I was relieved that I wasn't being arrested after all. I really didn't think I could handle the Big House! (After the previous night, I wouldn't want to be the inmate that had the bunk below mine, would you?)

Secondly, I was a little amused that Aunt Barbara would think a kidnapper would want to break into her house and take the little myopic girl in the middle of the pack *WHO HAD PEED ON STRANGERS!* Unless she *thought* the kidnapper had scared the pee out of me. Hey, now that was a thought! Maybe they would have believed—nah, too far fetched, even for me.

Well, all's well that ends well, I had always heard. Granddaddy explained the real situation to the officers and then went to call my Aunt to apologize for everything.

I stood at the door as the police officers walked back to their patrol car, bemused smiles on their faces.

One of the officers said to the other as they climbed into the cruiser, "I guess we can just write this one up as a One-Eleven."

"A One-Eleven? What's that?" the other officer asked, puzzled.

The first officer flashed a grizzled-but-understanding grin. "*Pee and Run*," he said as he put the car in gear, backing out of the driveway.



LisaCLove@bellsouth.net

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.

444 Days: *A Prisoner of War Story*

By Christopher Holbert

W

hen I would visit my grandparents in east Tennessee, my grandmother, Levonia, often told me how my grandfather, Kyle, had jet-black hair, before he went overseas to serve his country.

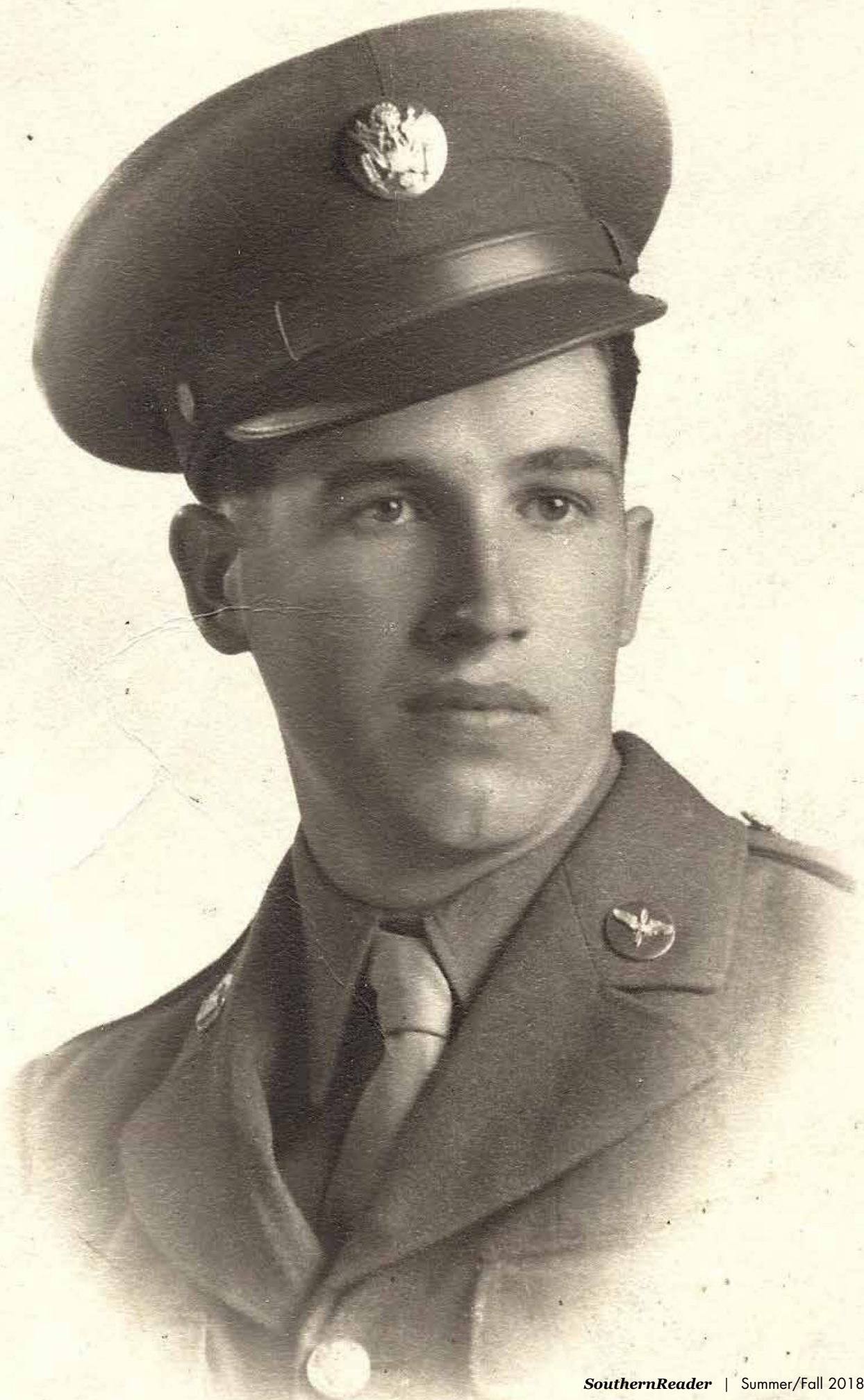
When he returned three years later, his hair was completely white. As a little kid, I wondered if he dyed his hair, but quickly realized that white hair dye was not needed for a prisoner of war (POW) who had lived through the *Black March* of World War II.

Roy Kyle Holbert grew up in a small community called Swannanoa, in western North Carolina. In 1942, his life changed dramatically when, at the age of 21, he was drafted into the United States Army Airforce. He was first stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, which is about 250 miles east of Swannanoa.

His training took him all over the country. From Fort Bragg, he was sent to Miami Beach, Florida for basic training. From there he went to aircraft mechanic school in Amarillo, Texas. However, it was in Seattle, Washington where he received advance training on a B-17 bomber, and once he was able to pass the eye exam, he was immediately sent to Wendover, Utah for gunnery school. Finally, he returned to Texas, where he was assigned to a ten-man, B-17 crew, as the flight engineer-top turret gunner.

After months of flight training, the crew was ready to go overseas. The first week of October 1943, they went to Scott Field, Illinois to pick up a new B-17, nicknamed the *Susan Ruth*, and then proceeded to Gander Field, Newfoundland. After weathering a blizzard, they took off for Scotland. From there, they were assigned to the 306th Bomb Group, which was part of the 369th Squadron (Heavy), located at Thurleigh Airfield near Bedford England. They arrived at the base on October 15, 1943.

When I came to,
a man with an axe
over his shoulder
tried to talk to
me, but I did not
understand him.
I could not
understand or
speak French.



From October through January, Kyle's crew flew eight missions. The ninth mission occurred on February 8, 1944. Their target was Frankfurt, Germany.

In the latter half of my grandfather's 88 years of life, he wrote about this mission:

As we started our bombing run, the Germans zeroed in on us with flak guns. Even though we were flying at 30,000 feet, the flak guns were more accurate than we had seen. We did evasive action, but they still tracked us, and we were hit. We lost three feet from the left-wing tip. We had trouble with our bomb bay doors, but I was able to drop our bombs by using the emergency bomb release. The doors would not close after I dropped the bombs. I tried to close the doors mechanically but was unable to close them.

I returned to my gun turret and looked down to my right and saw fighter planes through a break in the clouds. A few moments later two FW190 fighters were attacking us. I could see one making its attack from the front, but he flew too low for me to fire my guns at him. When he opened fire on us, he knocked out our no. 2 and no. 3 engines, setting them on fire. One 200mm shell went between my legs tearing a hole in my flight suit and hitting the bomb bay doors behind me. The backs of my legs were sprayed with fragments. Moments later I heard the bailout alarm.

As I came out of the turret, I saw the co-pilot, George (Eike), leaving his seat, as he motioned for me to follow him. I grabbed my parachute and snapped one side of my harness and followed him toward the nose of the plane. As he reached the nose, he turned and motioned

for me to jump. I pulled the handle to release the nose hatch, but nothing happened. I pulled again, and one pin came loose causing the wire to pull through my hand and cutting my fingers to the bone.

Eike pushed the door open and held it while I proceeded to leave the plane. The door caught my feet, and I was hanging outside the plane with my feet being held by the door. I lost everything out of my pockets, including my dog tags.

I kicked myself loose from the door. When my parachute opened I realized I had forgotten to fasten the other side to my harness. I did not have the strength to pull myself up to fasten it. This caused me to be pulled sideways, and I hit the ground on one leg. I injured my knee and back, and I was knocked out. When I came to, a man with an axe over his shoulder tried to talk to me, but I did not understand him. I could not understand or speak French.

After he left, I crawled to a bush pile and hid my chute, and then crawled away from it. The back of my flight suit was burned half way up the legs.

Kyle was found, a half hour later, by German soldiers, and they took him to a small hospital in Hirson, France. Later in the evening, a 19-year-old German Luftwaffe pilot approached Kyle at the hospital. Having been educated in New York, the pilot spoke English well. He shook hands with my grandfather and identified himself as the one who flew the plane that shot down the *Susan Ruth* and told my grandfather, "I'm sorry it had to be you, but that is the game of war."

The German pilot who shot down my grandfather's plane told him, "I'm sorry it had to be you, but that is the game of war."

After a few weeks in the hospital, Kyle was moved to St. Giles prison in Brussels, Belgium:

I spent two weeks in a room with nine other men sleeping on the concrete floor. Every morning we could hear gun shots coming from the direction of the courtyard. We assumed it was the execution of the day.

Kyle was moved, by night, from St. Giles to the POW interrogation camp at Frankfurt and spent 22 days in solitary confinement. Over those 22 days, he was interrogated 16 times, and was threatened regularly that he would be shot for being a spy, since he had lost his dog tags which would have identified him.

While being interrogated, Kyle only told them his name, rank, and serial number. Eventually, the Germans were able to confirm this information. After those few weeks, he was sent to the prison camp, Stalag Luft VI in Heydekrug, East Prussia, near the Lithuanian border. He was held prisoner until July 1944, when the camp was evacuated.

My grandfather said that his scariest moment occurred after Stalag Luft VI was evacuated. The POWs were loaded into a coal train freighter, handcuffed to each other, in pairs of two. Because there was limited room in the boxcars that they were transported in, everyone was forced to stand during the entire journey. The POWs had no idea where they were going.

That night, the train stopped. Everyone was told to exit the boxcars. The German soldiers commanded the POWs to start running two miles uphill. The Germans yelled that they would give the POW's a few minutes running start, before the dogs and the bayonets would be coming after them. Even though Kyle was exhausted, his good fortune was being hand-

cuffed to an American wrestling champion from Pennsylvania. The champion fighter told Kyle, "I'm not going to let you slow me down," and as the men grew more fatigued, the champion wrestler dragged my grandfather along with him. Eventually, the men reached their next destination, Stalag Luft IV at Gross Tychow (near Stargard, Poland).

At Stalag Luft IV, Kyle had a reunion with Joe Muscial, the left waist gunner on the *Susan Ruth*. It was the only

From October through January, Kyle's crew flew eight missions. The ninth mission occurred on February 8, 1944. Their target was Frankfurt, Germany.



familiar face my grandfather encountered during his captivity. Because the Russian offensive began to enter Poland, Kyle was among the 6,000+ prisoners ordered to leave Stalag IV during some of the coldest winter months that Europe experienced in the 20th century. The *Black March* had begun.

On February 6, 1945 we were to evacuate camp again. This time we walked for 86 days. It was estimated that we walked 470 miles. We slept in barns and fields at night. Food was scarce on the farm. We ate potatoes that had been cooked in vats for the hogs. I suffered from frozen feet, malnutrition, dysentery, and lost one-third of my weight. I was liberated by American troops at Bitterfeld, Germany on

the Elbe River on April 26, 1945. After 444 days as a POW, I was ready to go home!

Kyle returned to the United States with no fanfare for what he had endured. He was debriefed and discharged from San Antonio, Texas on September 27, 1945. He was given a train ticket back to Swannanoa, North Carolina, where he had a joyful reunion with his family and his fiancé, Levonia. Over the years, Kyle was frequently asked how he kept his sanity during those troubled days in captivity. He always gave the same answer—giving credit to God and a copy of the New Testament that Levonia had given him before he went overseas.

Many years after my grandfather was freed, a local Belgian veterinarian, Dr. Paul Delahaye, bought the land where the *Susan Ruth* had crashed. He bought the land because, as a child, he had suffered the atrocities of the German Nazis, and he greatly revered the U.S. service men who had liberated the Belgian people. He founded the *Belgian American Foundation*, and in 1989 built a monument dedicated to the crew of the *Susan Ruth*. The monument features one of the plane's propellers.

In August of 1989, Dr. Delahaye invited Kyle and the three other surviving members of the crew to Belgium for the unveiling of the monument that was dedicated to them. The men and their spouses spent 11 days with Dr. Delahaye,

where they were treated like royalty.

For my grandfather, the most memorable part of the trip was being approached by a man who had witnessed the crash of the *Susan Ruth*:

On February 8, 1944 near Macquenoise (Southern Belgium, near the French Border) a seven-year-old boy was walking home from school when he saw my plane (B-17) coming down with smoke coming from it. The plane crashed in the corner of a cow pasture near his home. He and his mother went to the plane and retrieved my leather flight jacket which was partially burnt. He and his mother removed the Air Force patch and the "Fightin' Bitin'" squadron patch from the jacket. On August 26, 1989 the boy (a man now) presented these two patches to me (45 years later.)

My grandmother remembered watching the man place two brightly colored patches into my grandfather's open palm. At that moment the horrific memories of Kyle's past surfaced into the present—and my grandfather was overcome with healing tears.



Christopher Holbert is a Technology Specialist and writer, who enjoys traveling. He was born and raised in southeastern Pennsylvania and has visited 46 out of 50 states. Currently he resides in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The information in this article came primarily from a letter that Christopher's grandfather wrote for the family. Doing an online search under Roy Kyle Holbert's name, you may come across a few interviews that he gave later in his life. The *Black March* is one name of the *Great March West* that thousands of troops were a part of. If you are interested in more information on the crew of the *Susan Ruth*, there is a book called *Shot Down*, written by the son of the pilot, Steve Snyder. Questions and comments can be sent to 444dayPOW@gmail.com.



The 369th Bombardment Squadron "Fightin' Bitin'" patch

This song was written by Kyle Holbert's son, Joe and his wife, Karen about his father.

444 Days: A Song for Dad

Lyrics by Joe and Karen Holbert/ Music by Joe Holbert

Verse 1 (4/4 Time)

A young man from the mountains, called to serve his country.
Flew overseas in a B-17, to fight for those not free (to fight for those not free.)
His plane crashed in Belgium. A parachute saved his life.
The enemy found him hiding, lost in the darkest night (lost in the darkest night.)

Refrain

Four hundred forty four days, a prisoner of war.
Four hundred forty four days, Death outside his door.
He prayed for his crew, and the woman to be his bride.
Freedom was his dream, and God was his guide (God was his guide.)

Verse 2

Forced to march from prison camp, afraid, sick, and starving,
Eighty six days through ice and snow, never told why he was marching
(never told why he was marching.)
A muddy, bony soldier, limped into Germany.
He reached the Allied Armies! They saluted and set him free
(they saluted and set him free!)

Refrain

Verse 3 (3/4 Time)

Forty four years later—a monument for his plane.
He flew to Belgium to be honored, other survivors did the same
(three others did the same.)
The POW was my father—so grateful to have survived.
At the end of the festivities—there was one more surprise (one more surprise.)

Bridge

A man approached my father—was a boy when Dad's plane went down.
To the plane, he ran to find treasures, Dad's jacket lay on the ground
(his burnt jacket lay on the ground.)

Verse 4

Two patches from the jacket, the man saved forty-five years!
When he handed them to my father, Dad was overcome with tears (overcome
with healing tears.)

Refrain

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Out of Hand

By Niles Reddick

N

ormally, I go to the grocery store early—before there is a crowd, before the parking places are taken, before the only buggies left are ones that have bum wheels, before there's only wilted lettuce and punctured grapes left in the produce section, before the sanitizing wipe container is empty, before the only loaves of bread left are last week's stiff ones, and where the uncooked hamburger meat is already browned.

I knew it was a mistake to stop and pick up a few items right after work, but I did it anyway, and it seemed everyone else in town was there, too.

I knew it was a mistake to stop and pick up a few items right after work, but I did it anyway, and it seemed everyone else in town was there, too. I picked up the needed items, except I forgot coffee until I was on the last aisle and had to walk the length of the store again. As I rounded the corner, an obese woman backed into my buggy and scowled at me. Her motorized buggy's beeper wasn't working, and I mused if she had my forgetfulness and had to walk the store twice, and if she had more than carbs in her buggy, she likely wouldn't need to ride. Obviously, I knew there were people who were handicapped who need to ride, just like those who need to park closer, but sometimes I wonder if the system isn't abused.

When I checked out, the cashier was so busy chatting with another cashier and flirting with the high school bag boy that



sliding my items toward him to bag was more like fast-pitch softball, and the bagger was so busy *scanning the cashier*, that eggs almost went in with cans and bread almost went in with drinks. Had I not directed the re-bagging, I would have had to go shopping again for bread and eggs.

The credit card machine took my debit card, but the screen got stuck on Spanish, a class I hadn't taken since high school, and truth be told, that was back when everyone got a pass, and it wasn't required for a bachelor of arts in public colleges.

The manager had to come over and manually put in my information. It was embarrassing and there was a bit of shifting in the lane, like when one lane on the interstate slows and everyone gets nervous they'll be delayed and jumps in front of other cars to the other lane. I imagined other shoppers thought my debit card had been rejected when, in fact, it had never been rejected, even though it was close to the end of the month and funds were getting low.

Paid and out the door, I found my Camry, put the heavy items on the floorboard, and placed the softer items in bags on the backseat. I pushed the buggy to the holder, the front wheels hit a pothole and splashed mud onto my new pumps, and I walked back and

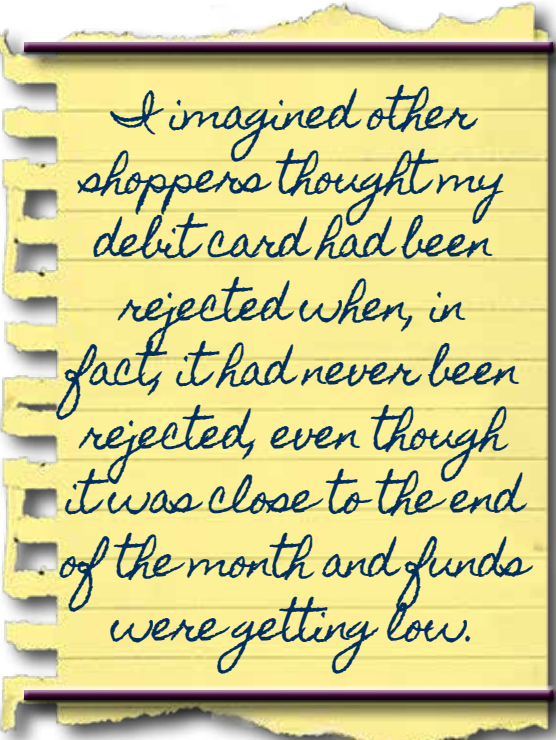
got in. I wondered why I hadn't locked my car, or if I pressed the unlock key out of habit and

forgot I had done that. Normally, I locked it, not that there's anything anyone would want to steal, though I've heard ABBA, Rod Stewart, and the Bee Gee's CDs are making a comeback.

My cell rang, and my husband Gary asked where I was and what we were having for dinner. I told him to hold on, and I couldn't seem to get my key to work in the ignition. He told me, "Turn

the steering wheel just a bit and see if that don't do it." I told him that it wasn't working. He told me to make sure I was using the right key, and so I pulled the key out and held them up, looking at all of them and made sure to put the bigger Toyota key wrapped in black plastic with the emblem back in the ignition. I tried it again, and it didn't work.

At that very moment, a man tapped on my window and was saying something and I locked the door and told Gary this man was trying to get in the car, to call the police on the home phone, which he did. I told him, "Don't hang up. Please don't hang up on me. He's trying to get in the car and he's yelling at me. Oh my God, he's crazy. He's going to kill me." I began to scream, "Help, Help," and Gary said, "The 911 operator says they are right there in the neighborhood" and I could



I imagined other shoppers thought my debit card had been rejected when, in fact, it had never been rejected, even though it was close to the end of the month and funds were getting low.

see the car with its blue lights coming through the parking lot, and I pressed the horn, but I was still scared. My heart was racing, I was crying, and the man was yelling. Some people took their time putting up their buggies, and I noticed some people were watching by their cars, but no one had come to my rescue.

The police stopped, blocked traffic, and got out. The man raised his hands and I couldn't hear what they were saying until the officer came to the window and said, "Ma'am, can you get out of the car?" I told my husband it was alright, that the police officer was here, and that I would call him back in a few minutes.

"Ma'am, can I see your license and registration?"

"Sure you can and I reached into my purse. I'm not sure what this man was trying to do."

"I'm trying to get into MY car," he said.

The officer compared registrations, walked around to the back of the car, and said, "Ma'am, I believe this is his car."

"What? Oh, my God. Where in the world is my car?" I looked and spotted it one row over. "Oh, my. I'm so embarrassed. I thought you were trying to rob or attack me. I'm so sorry," I said. "Oh, how embarrassing. I'm sorry officer. It just got out of hand."

"Sir, do you want to press charges?"

"I suppose not."

"Oh, thank you," I told him. "I suppose I need to pay more attention."

The cars were identical. It just seemed to spiral and get out of hand. I noticed some of the crowd that had formed were shaking their heads and mumbling to each other, and I'm sure the grocery store security will get a laugh at my expense. I almost forgot my groceries, but I got them, apologized again and headed over to my car. I couldn't recall a time I had been more embarrassed, and

I called my husband on the way home to tell him what I had done. He didn't scold, but laughed and said, "You'll probably make the news. You got hamburger meat, right? I've got the grill warming."

I hadn't picked up hamburger meat. I knew there was something I forgot. "No," I said. "I think we should just eat a salad." There was no way I could go back today.



Niles Reddick lives in Jackson, Tennessee with his wife and two children. His books are available on Amazon.com and in iBooks. For more information on the author, visit his website at www.nilesreddick.com.



Compassionate Warrior

By Brandy N. Powell

It is amazing to me how God orchestrates even the most painful parts of our lives and creates beauty from the ashes of it.

The year 2012 was one of the hardest years of my life. My grandfather was in and out of the hospital, my dad's house burned down, and then my oldest son got sick. At the time, I was six months pregnant and anxious. The anxiety was so bad that the phone ringing would throw me into a crying panic. So when my son, Dylan, was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia, I hit my limit.

My son was nine at the time and had been pale, feverish, and fatigued for about three weeks. I kept taking him back to the doctor and was told repeatedly that it was only pneumonia. Antibiotics weren't working, though, and I had to push for blood work to be done. That was the day everything changed, and we received the news that no parent ever wants to hear.

We didn't get a chance to process the news that Dylan had cancer before we were informed of treatment plans and a surgery to put a port in his chest for chemotherapy. We were told the first 30 days would be the most intensive phase, then the next stage would progress to a more manageable and less stressful phase. The first 19 days were spent in a daze as we followed the treatment plans and counted down the days until the "toughest part" was over. In the middle of the night on the 19th day, the other shoe dropped again.

I watched that night as my son seized and quit breathing. I watched as the nurses and doctors worked furiously to keep my son from dying. And then, after what seemed like an eternity, he began to breathe again. This was and still is a very important part of my story as

a mother, because this was my turning point. That was the point where I became a warrior. Before my son almost died, I pretty much just followed what the doctors were telling me and figured I would worry about the rest later.

I knew that Dylan's life was in God's hands, but I still had a very powerful role to play in this battle. I began searching for ways to strengthen Dylan's body through nutrition. I began interacting and having more thorough discussions with the doctors. I wasn't going to just sit back (i.e., *go with the flow*) anymore, I was going to be active and fight for my son.

I have always believed that there is a lesson in everything that happens in life. I believe that Dylan has a powerful testimony that will help others in the future. I believe that our lives have purpose, and we won't leave this earth until our purpose is fulfilled. I believe that God taught me how to be still and trust Him in the battles I can't control. I believe that God also taught me how to be a warrior, not just for my own son, but for others, as well.

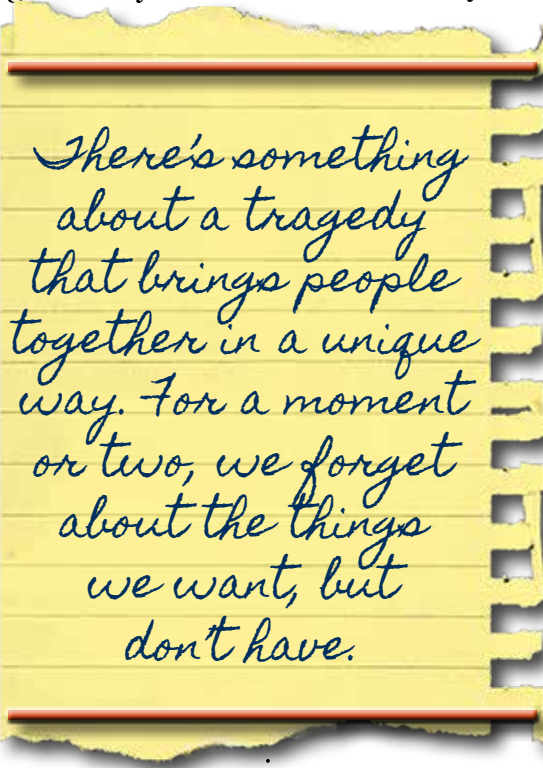
Cancer is a thief that seeks to steal and kill. Sometimes the journey is long, and sometimes the journey is short. Sometimes the war is won and celebrated here on earth, and sometimes the victory comes in the presence of Jesus when the physical body is no longer strong enough to fight. No one's path looks identical to the next, but those of us that go through the fight are bonded together, and we reach back and help others to navigate the rocky path.

My son's battle with cancer gave birth to a compassion in me for others. In many ways, I got to see the very best of human nature,

in spite of all the vitriol on the news. Family, friends, and strangers alike all came together to help my family. Some helped us financially, while others helped by bringing joy and magic into our lives. One such friend heard that my son wanted a *White Christmas*, and led a multi-community effort that resulted in my front lawn being covered in snow that Christmas morning. We didn't even know most of the people scattered across our front lawn, but they sacrificed their Christmas Eve in their warm homes in order to bring a smile to a little boy with cancer and make his wish come true.

There's something about a tragedy that brings people together in a unique way. For a moment or two, we forget about the things we want, but don't have. We forget about our different races and religions. We are one people from one race: the *human* race. We forget about our own problems while blessing someone else. It also feels amazing when you are on the giving end, even more than on the receiving end.

I don't ever want to forget this experience. Not just the good, but the bad as well. I want to remember, because it's given me a purpose for my life. The really hard parts allow me to have compassion for others, because I know what it feels like to wonder if your child will live or die. I will never know exactly how, or why, my son got sick, but I choose to see a ministry opportunity. I help families to honor my son and to remember all the friends that my family lost to cancer. In remembering those we've lost, we honor their families.



The Fisherman

By Monica Henry



ey, Jessie. Got some fish for me today?" Earl Summers raised himself slowly from his lawnchair as Jessie Stokes pulled into the driveway, jumping out of his truck before bringing it to a complete stop, his dark skin glistening with sweat.

"Yes suh, Mr. Earl, got a string full this morning. Nice string of fish." Jessie untied the galvanized bucket from inside the bed of his old truck. "You gonna be cleaning 'em right away," asked Jessie as he lifted the string of fish from the bucket. "If ya' ain't, then we's better put 'em in some fresh water."

"Yeah, I'll be cleaning 'em soon," said Earl, pitching his half-smoked cigarette on the gravel drive. "Might be a good idea to put 'em in a dishpan of water though. How much I owe you?"

"Five dollas too much?" asked Jessie.

"Guess I can manage that," replied Earl, removing his wallet from his back pocket.

"You got change for a twenty?" asked Earl, thumbing through the bills in his wallet.

"No suh," Jessie chuckled. "I sure ain't. I don't see many a them."

"Tell ya what, I'll stop by later on and leave it."

"I trust ya, Mr. Earl," said Jessie, grinning big and showing his gold tooth. "Ollie Mae's home, juss give to her. I got some more stops to make."

Earl walked to the back of the house, turned on the garden hose and filled a dishpan full of water. Clara turned from the kitchen sink. "Jessie bring you a lot of fish today?" she asked as Earl came through the back door.

"Several," answered Earl. "I'll clean 'em when I get back. I've got to take Jessie's money to him. I didn't have change."

"Well, goodness me, there's plenty of one dollar bills in the cracker tin."

"Didn't think of that," said Earl, nudging Clara away from the sink as he filled the palm of his hand with dishwashing liquid.

"I don't know why you buy fish from Jessie anyway, as much fishing as you do yourself."

"Just trying to help," he said as he dried his hands and left the room.

"Well, I could sure use some help with this ironing. Ollie Mae does a good job at it, too. Remember last summer when I took

Earl Summers was well known around Rowland Station. Everybody knew he was fond of two things—trading cattle and pretty women.



some things over for her to iron?”

Earl wasn't listening. He had already put on a clean undershirt and splashed himself with Old Spice. "I may be a while," he called out to Clara as he started out of the house. Before getting into his truck he removed the five dollar bill from his wallet and laid it on the seat.

"Is that you Mr. Earl?" "Land sakes, we ain't seen you in a month o' Sundays." Ida Belle Sikes balanced her apron full of green beans, stepping lightly between the rows of fresh turned soil. "Lovie," she called out, looking toward the front porch of the house, "Where's that cloth you's bringing?"

"Hold your horses, sister, I'm a coming," said Lovie, stepping cautiously down the wooden steps and spreading the worn quilt on the ground. Ida Belle dumped the apron full of green beans onto the cloth.

"Look who's here, Lovie. It's Mr. Earl." "She ain't seeing as good as she used to," Ida Belle said in a whisper.

"No, but I can still hear. How's Miz Clara, Mr. Earl?"

"She's just fine. You ladies been doing alright? It's been mighty hot."

"Oh, we's used to it. You folks make a garden this year?" asked Lovie. "Ida Belle, give Mr. Earl a mess o' these green beans."

"That's mighty nice of you ladies. Clara'll like that. Just saw you working in the garden, Miss Lovie, and wanted to stop and see how y'all were doing. Gotta get on over to Jessie's and pay him for some fish."

"I ain't seen Jessie pass yet," said Ida Belle.

"You can hear that old truck o' his a mile away. I'd say Ollie Mae's there, though."

"Probably is," said Earl, getting into his truck.

The sisters stood watching as Earl pulled onto the dirt road. "Give our best to Miz Clara," called Ida Belle.

Earl waved his hand from the open truck window, heading toward Jessie's.

Earl Summers was well known around Rowland Station. Everybody knew he was fond of two things—trading cattle and pretty women. But Clara thought the sun rose and set in Earl. He'd come close to gettin' himself killed a few times, as the story goes—like paying a visit to Luck Garrett's wife while Luck was out bailing hay. Sheriff Givens said ol' Luck had spotted Earl's pick-up at the back

of his house; left his tractor running and slipped in on his beloved Ruthie in bed with Earl. Luck nearly beat Earl to death—he would have, too if the sheriff hadn't got there when he did. Why, it's even been told that he walked right out the gymnasium door with Gloria Fraser during a school pie supper auction, while Clara was sitting in plain sight. There's a whole lot to tell about Earl Summers, and I'll try to work in some of it while I'm telling you about the worst thing that ever happened at Rowland Station.

Earl pulled his truck into the dirt driveway. Seeing that Jessie hadn't made it home yet, he drove closer to the back of the house. He could see Ollie Mae's thin frame through the screen door as he stepped upon the rickety porch. "Anybody home?" he called out as he sauntered into the tiny kitchen.

Why, it's even been told that he walked right out the gymnasium door with Gloria Fraser during a school pie supper auction, while Clara was sitting in plain sight.

Ollie Mae turned quickly toward him. “Well, look who’s here. Earl Summers. What brings you over this way?” Ollie Mae asked as she took a handful of dredged okra from the bowl and carefully dropped it into the skillet of hot grease.

“Just dropped by to pay Jessie for some fish. Guess he ain’t home yet?”

“No, he ain’t,” she answered, wiping her hands on a towel. She turned to face Earl, putting her hands on her hips. “You got some money for him, I can take it. And while you’re at it, you might throw in some for milk and diapers, as she gestured toward the light-skinned baby playing happily in the corner of the room.

“Well, Sugar—that depends—you’ve been awfully feisty. Besides, he looks just like Jessie to me.” Earl stepped closer to Ollie Mae, pulled the five-dollar bill out of his shirt pocket, and pitched it on the counter, grabbing her by the arm. She jerked her arm free, lifted up a spoonful of hot grease and slung it toward Earl. She could hear the sizzle as it hit his forearm.

“You little tramp,” he whispered as he slapped her face, causing her to slip on the greasy floor, hitting her head on the kitchen table as she fell.

“You jus stay there,” Earl whispered as he snatched up the five dollar bill and left.

Earl slowly pumped his brakes when he saw Ida Belle and Lovie were still outside. Keeping his left arm inside the truck he stopped at the edge of the yard. “Ain’t nobody home at Jessie’s, he yelled to the ladies. “I’ll see him later.”

“Well, land sakes—Ollie Mae ought to be there with the baby.” Ida Belle called out.

“Nope”, said Earl, shoving the gear shift back into low, slowly moving the truck forward, needing to get off the dirt road and head toward home.

Jessie Stokes was a good man, doing what he could to make a living—fishing, mostly. He’d grown up there, on that old dirt road. Dry Creek road, they called it. Jessie liked to tell stories about fishing in that creek when he was a boy. Sold his first string of fish from that creek. Knew everybody around too, and everybody liked Jessie. Folks was proud when he finally found a wife. He’d gone to Detroit one summer and low and behold came back married. Ollie Mae seemed to be a good fit for Jessie but some people whispered she was just a bit too uppity, maybe thought she was better than Jessie, cause she was from a big city.

It was just awful when Jessie found Ollie Mae on the kitchen floor; blood oozing from her head, grease and okra splattered everywhere, and the baby crying up a storm.

Jessie was scared. He was cussing, praying and crying all at the same time. He shook Ollie Mae, but she was limp. He picked her up, cradled her in his arms and hurried to his truck.

He ran back in, scooped up the crying baby and sat him in the floor board. Half of Ollie Mae’s body hung off the old truck seat as he sped down the dirt road, his horn blaring as he drove right up to Ida Belle and Lovie’s front porch. The sisters had never seen anything like it. Jessie took the screaming baby from

Earl stepped closer to Ollie Mae, pulled the five-dollar bill out of his shirt pocket, and pitched it on the counter, grabbing her by the arm.

the truck and sat him on the porch as he yelled to them as he drove off. "Please watch the baby, Ollie Mae's hurt."

It was early, but Clara was ready for Bible study. "Your supper's on the stove." She called to Earl, as she checked her pocketbook, setting it on the kitchen table with her Bible. Earl came into the kitchen holding a washcloth over his arm.

"Damn radiator, spewed all over my damn arm." Before Clara could say a word Earl was telling the story of how he'd needed to get a new radiator, and it's a wonder that the burn wasn't worse than it was.

"Well, let me see." said Clara. "You don't need it covered up like that." Earl grabbed her wrist with such force that it startled Clara. "What's wrong with you?" asked Clara.

"It hurts like hell." said Earl, moving away from Clara and settling into his recliner, and flipping on the TV. "Thought you were going to church."

Tears burned Clara's eyes as she grabbed her purse and Bible, slamming the front door as she left. She heard the roar of Jessie Sykes' old truck as she opened her car door, barely catching a glimpse of him as he passed by. She'd never seen Jessie drive that fast.

Clara just couldn't shake off the hurt like she used to. And, Earl had hurt her plenty—nothing that friends and neighbors knew anything about. Oh no, she'd never let anybody know that Earl Summers wasn't always the easy-going, friendly guy that everybody

thought he was. She'd heard the whispers and insinuations, even confronted Earl once but he'd slapped her so hard, she fell. You see, the thing with Clara was that she didn't want anybody around Rowland Station thinking that she and Earl didn't have the perfect marriage. So, she just went right on making excuses for Earl.

News travels fast in a small community, especially bad news. Gossip on the party-lines had everything happening from Jessie beating up on Ollie Mae to Ollie Mae being pregnant again and fainting. When Clara stopped in to see the sisters on the way to taking Ollie Mae and Jessie a homemade chess pie, Lovie had to recount the whole afternoon to Miz Clara. She just couldn't understand how Mr. Earl didn't find Ollie Mae in the house if she had fallen in the kitchen.

Clara stood at the back door of Jessie and Ollie Mae's. Before she could knock, Ollie Mae opened the screen door. The baby straddled her hip, her head bandaged, looking even thinner than Clara remembered. "I heard about your fall and wanted to bring a little something over." said Clara.

"You didn't have to do that." murmured Ollie Mae, timidly. She pulled out a kitchen chair, while motioning for Clara to do the same.

Ollie Mae coddled her baby, while she and Clara made small talk. Clara's eyes darted back and forth from the baby to Ollie Mae. "What a sweet baby, said Clara. What's his name?"

"Jessie Jr." said Ollie Mae, shifting the baby from her lap to her shoulder.

The thing with Clara was that she didn't want anybody around Rowland Station thinking that she and Earl didn't have the perfect marriage.

Earl shook his glass, rattling the ice. “Nobody makes iced tea like you, Sugar.”

Clara poured Earl another glass full from the yellow Tupperware pitcher. “Most people just brew the tea too long,” said Clara. Earl took another big swallow, and leaned back in his chair. “I’ll be up early—got to take a load of cattle over to Johnson’s.”

“I’ll probably be up,” said Clara, busy clearing the dinner table.

But Clara wasn’t up. And neither was Earl. Clara had slept more soundly than she had in months, but Earl—was something wrong? “I thought you were getting up early,” said Clara as she shook Earl’s shoulder.

“Damn,” yelled Earl, jumping out of bed and staggering across the room. He just couldn’t find the energy to load those cattle today. Maybe tomorrow.

Clara stood at the kitchen window watching Earl as he herded the cattle into the bed of his old livestock trailer. He’d been meaning to take those few cattle over to Johnson’s for three days now. “Feels like I’ve got the damn flu,” he’d said to Clara that morning at breakfast.

“Maybe you ought to see the doctor.” Clara said as she cleared the breakfast table.

“I ain’t like you, running to the doctor over every little ailment,” said Earl as he stood and shoved his chair back under the table, wiping the sweat from his face and neck.

Clara didn’t answer. She ran the sink full of hot water, slowly squeezing the last little drop of Joy from the yellow bottle.

It was late afternoon before Earl got back home. Clara had just filled a bucket with ripe tomatoes from the garden, making sure the reddest, most perfect ones lay on top. “Want a glass of iced tea?” Clara called out to Earl as she set the bucket down by the outdoor chairs. Earl didn’t answer, but the fact that he continued walking toward the house probably meant that he did. Clara handed the cold

glass of tea to Earl as she sat down across from him. “These chairs are going to need a coat of paint before the summer’s over,” said Clara rubbing her hand over the faded green chair arm.

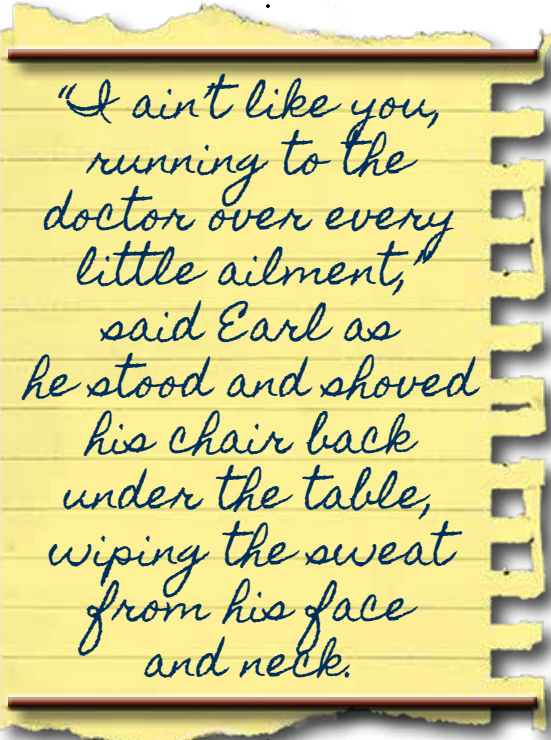
“There’s some green paint left from last year in the barn,” said Earl. “The rats are getting worse down there though, so watch where you’re stepping.”

“I thought you put rat poison out down there,” Clara said, sipping her tea and pouring

Earl another glass.

“Well hell, I did. It’s all gone, though and the rats are worse. Guess I need something stronger.”

I know, you’re probably wondering what’s happened to Jessie and Ollie Mae. Had Jessie by any chance seen Earl and his burned arm? Did Jessie believe Ollie Mae’s story about slipping on the greasy floor? And, did the sisters mention to Jessie that Earl had



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under the table,
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from his face
and neck.*

driven by that terrible afternoon. And, of course, the obvious I know you're curious about—*does Jessie suspect anything about his light-skinned baby boy?* So, if you're beginning to get the least bit bored, let me just say, there's plenty more to tell, if you've got the time to listen.

Salt of the earth. That's what folks around Rowland Station always said about Clara Summers. Salt of the earth! Why, Clara was just a saint. Went to church every Sunday, prayer meetin' on Wednesday night, cleaned the church building, took food to any and everybody, sick or not. She gardened, sewed, kept a spanking clean house and was always dressed real nice. Earl Summers was a lucky man. Lucky he had Clara when he started ailing. He just got sicker and sicker. Finally, he gave in to see the local doctor. "Ain't nothing wrong with you Earl, except meanness working out." Old Doc Burton gave Earl a hearty laugh and a healthy pat on the back and sent him on his way.

It wasn't long 'til Clara decided it was time to sell the cattle. After all, Earl could barely get out of bed, much less take care of a herd of cattle. So Clara sold the remaining cattle to Hiram Johnson, and he promised to pass the word that Earl's cattle trailer was also for sale. It bore on Clara's mind that poor ol' Jessie was in bad need of a truck, so she made a deal that, if Jessie would do some odd jobs for her occasionally—such as taking off the trash, tilling the garden spot, helping her with the farm now and then—that sort of thing—and maybe have Ollie Mae do a bit of ironing and cleaning, she'd be willing to make a trade. Well, Jessie thought he'd died and gone to Heaven. He could never repay Miz Clara.

The little church at Rowland's Crossing was standing room only the day of Earl Summers' funeral. Oh, the community didn't turn out to send Earl out on a pillowy cloud to Heaven, but everybody knew it was in respect for Miz Clara. And the whole congregation thought it was mighty Christian of Miz Clara to ask Jessie Stokes to be a pall bearer. Why, she even insisted that Ollie Mae and the baby sit right up there with Jessie on the front row.

Things got pretty much back to normal after a few months. Jessie kept his bargain with Miz Clara and things around the farm ran smoother than ever. Folks noticed Hiram Johnson's truck parked at Miz Clara's back door a lot; you know, helping out with farm details and all. Ida Belle and Lovie had enough gossip to last them fifty more years. And Ollie Mae showed up once a week for her household duties, bringing little Jessie Jr. along with her.

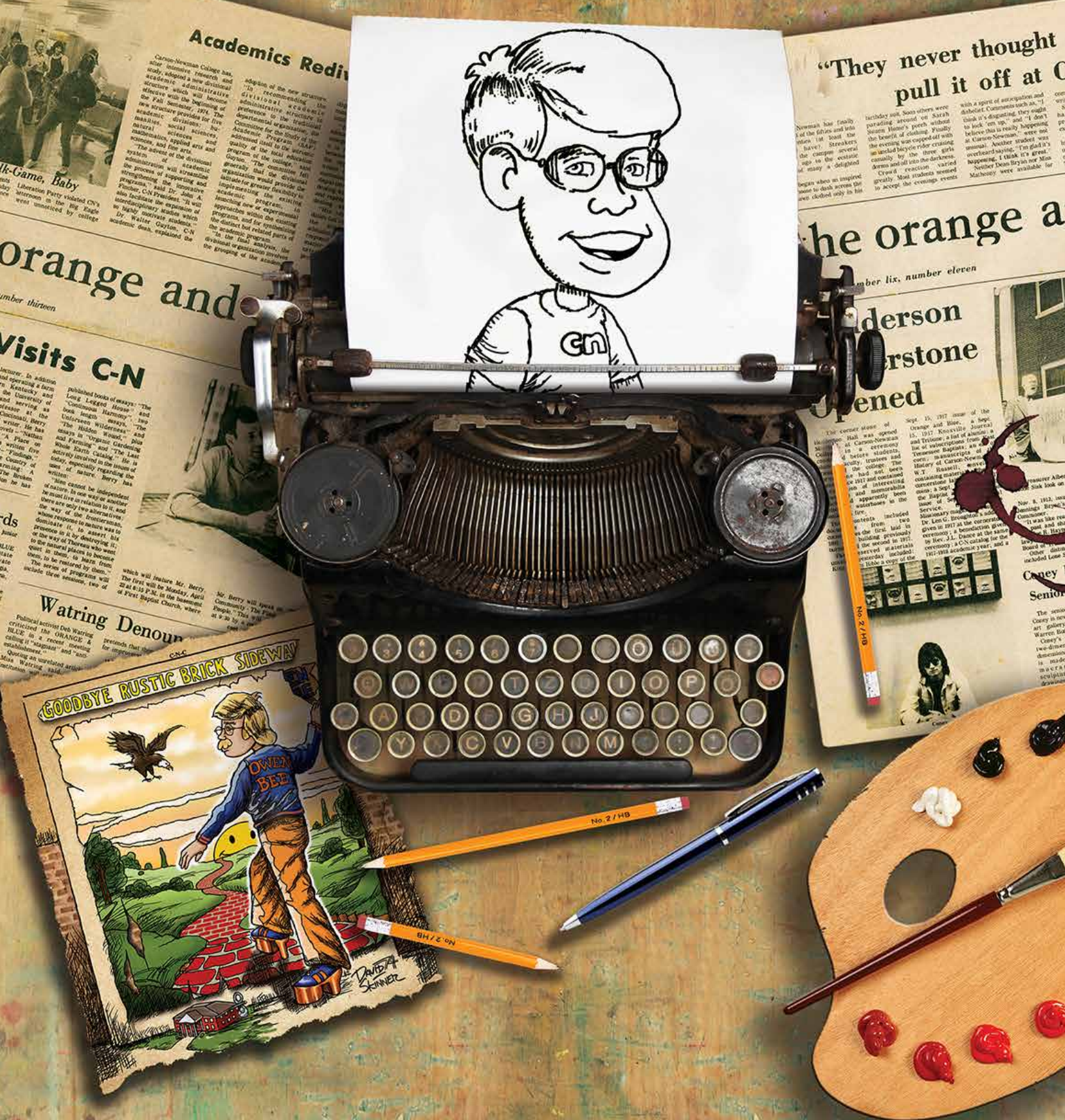
"You're the sweetest little boy." Clara rocked Jessie Jr. while Ollie Mae ironed. "I never had a little boy, and you're just a little darling," said Clara, hugging the baby. "Alright, Ollie Mae, turn off the iron and come and sit down. How about a glass of iced tea?"



Monica Henry is a freelance writer and resides in Tennessee. She writes in several genres, including poetry and fiction.

Why, Clara even insisted that Ollie Mae and the baby sit right up there with Jessie on the front row.

Owen's Back!



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A Walk on the Seasonal Cusp

By Daniel Shortt

As I quietly crackle
Through the fragile, crisp and fading leaves
From forgotten seasons long gone,
The late summer/early fall dawning sun
Slowly grasps the jagged crest
Of the looming mountain ridge,
Its fingers pulsing electric bright.

I am retracing
The soft and silent footsteps
Of countless barefoot warriors,
Buffalo-booted pioneers,
And broken-shoe'd soldiers,
As the now-emboldened sun
Marks the early morning minutes of the day.

Then, there's that instant when the rays, like shards,
Poke between the fading leaves
On their feathery downward flight.
And I ponder and I pity
The wanderers, still unborn and yet to come,
And I ask the waiting ridge
If the warriors, pioneers, and soldiers from long ago
Thought the same of me.



Saucers in the Valley

By David Ray Skinner



Varnell was in a daze. Maybe it was because he had been distracted by his old pickup's AM radio—the New Orleans radio station's signal, although powerful at night, sometimes had trouble making the giant electronic leap over the mountains into his Tennessee valley.

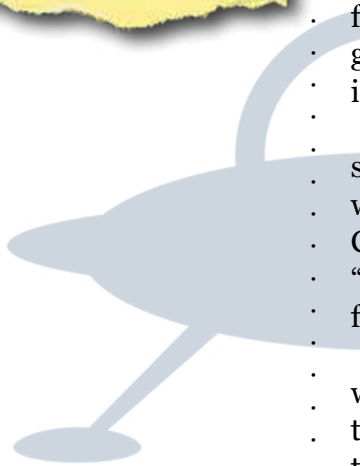
Plus, DJ Charlie Douglas was sounding less like the *Voice of the American Trucker* and more like a staccato ad for white noise. Or, maybe it was because he was not accustomed to being at the far end of his property—what he called the upper forty—at night in the middle of July after a heavy dinner meal of fried chicken, green beans, gravy and biscuits. However, a little after supper, a few of his cattle had made it through a narrow gap in the wooden fence, and he had grudgingly tracked them to that pasture, at the foot of the mountain.

Whatever the reason, Varnell was snapped out of his complacent trance by the bright swirling lights and the menacing electronic hum as the two aircraft hung low over the far end of the pasture where it met the mountain woods. He blinked several times, and rubbing his eyes, he jumped out and stood in front of the idling pickup and was silhouetted in the yellow glare of the dim headlights. *Them flying things look like big shiny pot lids*, he thought, similar to the one their daughter, Varnella had used that afternoon to cover the green beans she had snapped before running out of the kitchen in a *Billy Tom* crying jag. But these were much larger pot lids, with spectacular running lights, and one of them toggled back and forth in what Varnell interpreted as some sort of salute, as he stood in the pickup's makeshift spotlight. After hovering low over the pasture for a minute—he could see his missing cattle frozen stupidly in the glow of their running lights—the two gleaming objects abruptly shot up vertically several hundred feet in tandem and disappeared into the summer night sky.

Varnell stood there mute as the old pickup behind him sputtered, and the headlights dimmed and brightened in rhythm with the engine. Then, suddenly, the radio jumped into focus with Charlie Douglas's familiar voice cutting through the humid night. "That was *The Blue Sky Boys* coming to you—*wherever you are*—from way down here in New Orleans!"

Varnell quickly gathered himself and swung back behind the wheel of the truck and ground it into gear, kicking up dust, which turned red behind the cracked taillights, leaving the errant cattle to their private stupors. He tore out of the upper pasture, cut across part of the garden and through the chicken yard, and hit the

Varnell was snapped out of his complacent trance by the bright swirling lights and the menacing electronic hum as the two aircraft hung low over the far end of the pasture where it met the mountain woods.





dirt-and-gravel driveway in high gear, fishtailing as he rounded the bend by the farmhouse. Varnella and his wife, Ruby Nell were in the swing on the front porch, and they watched him with open mouths as he flew by the house, on down the driveway and onto the main road at the bottom of the hill. "Well, I..." said Ruby Nell.

Once on the valley road, which ended at the main highway that led into the small town, Varnell began to collect his thoughts and rehearse his story. *It did sound far-fetched*, he thought. The radio started to crackle and hiss again, but he didn't even notice. Before he knew it, he was rolling onto the town square and pulling up in front of the police station. He parked the pickup and hurriedly climbed the steps and threw open the frosted-glass front door. Just inside, in the lobby, Sheriff McAnnally was leaning back in his black wooden office chair with his crossed boots stretched out across his cluttered desk. He held a torn newspaper in one big paw, and scratched at his slick black thatch of hair with the other. On the desk was a small electric fan which whirled noisily, fluttering the "1974 Girls of the Appalachians" calendar on the wall behind him.

The two men had known each other for most of their lives. They had actually been friends once, around the second or third grade, but with the advent of football in McAnnally's world, and 4-H and *Future Farmers* in Varnell's, the two had been distant since junior high. In high school, their only communication had been when McAnnally greeted Varnell rudely in the hallways with a swift and powerful punch to the arm. This particular night, he glanced up slowly as Varnell came to rest in front of the desk.

"As I live and breathe...Varnell Pugh. What brings you out on a hot summer night in the middle of the week?" he said, looking back

down at his paper.

"Uh, hey Sheriff," Varnell began. "Uh, I just saw something real strange."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"One of them AFOs."

"What in the *Stamp Hill* is a AFO?" said McAnnally quizzically. "Sounds like a Yankee social club."

"Alien Flying Object," Varnell said excitedly, "Martians...I don't know. Up on my land, right there where it meets the park boundary at my upper forty."

McAnnally, suddenly interested, folded his paper and sat up in the wooden chair. "That so? Tell on, Varnell."

"Some of my cattle got through the fence again," he began, "and I got a late start, but I followed their tracks up to the upper forty. I wudn't payin' too much attention, I guess, but once I got up there and started lookin' around, something shot up around the tree line. Real quick-like." Varnell held out his hand, straight and palm down in a clumsy, almost comical imitation of what he had seen. "Saucers. Two of 'em."

"You weren't on county park land, were you, Varnell?"

"I wudn't. I saw them from my field, but I sure can't vouch for them saucers. I don't know where they been or they goin'."

McAnnally massaged his temples with his big right hand. "You sure about this, Varnell?"

"I know what I saw."

"Okay." The sheriff sighed and pushed back from his desk. "Kenslow! Git in here!"

A skinny deputy stuck his head in the doorway. "Yessir, boss!"

"Kenslow, could you please es-cort our friend, Varnell here, to holding number three."

Varnell looked at Deputy Kenslow and then back at McAnnally and thought, *what kind of a*

Everyone in the county knew about the rumors of McAnnally and moonshine. Some people said he looked the other way in return for a piece of the action; others said he was the action.

fool joke is this? It's late and I got to get home. That dad-blamed McAnnally.

"Varnell," said McAnnally, "we needs to get some paperwork fixed, and I, of course, got to get what we call a formal statement from you, so if you would be so kind as to just wait a few minutes in our, uh, *formal statement room*, we would ever so much appreciate it."

"But..." Varnell said, confused. He looked back over his shoulder as Deputy Kenslow took him by the arm and led him out of the lobby and toward the back of the building.

"Thank you, Varnell," McAnnally called out after him, his thin lips pursed in a forced smile. "Be a good citizen, now."

Varnell felt tired and dazed. He had been up since four that morning. If he had just gone home, he'd be about to climb in bed. *I'm never going to get to sleep now*, he thought. He didn't even tell Ruby Nell where he was going. She was going to be real mad. And Varnella was probably still on the porch crying. *That Billy Tom*, he thought, I'm going to have to kill him just to make our lives halfway normal again. He was looking at the cell's white concrete and thinking of that worthless Billy Tom.

The loud clang of the cell door behind him jarred him back to reality. Their formal statement room sure looks like a jail cell, he thought wistfully. *Think. Think. Think, Varnell, you dad-blamed fool—why would they put you in a cell?* He began mentally retracing his steps and the events of the evening. *Okay, let's recollect. Were you speeding? Come on Varnell, not in that old truck! Did you run the stop sign? Why would I care on a night like this? Did you pay that parking ticket? Good grief, that was three years ago.* None of his questions made sense. Then Varnell started thinking about what he had said and how his story must have sounded. That fool McAnnally has got to know that anything is possible out there in the valley. Especially on a summer night when every living thing is hot and miserable, inside and out. He has to be familiar with that part of the county. *In fact...*

Varnell stopped mid-thought and sat down on the little bed in the holding cell. *Come to think of it, he had seen the sheriff's patrol car driving by*

the house late at night—always on nights when he couldn't sleep. On nights when he could sleep, the sheriff and his posse couldn't have roused him with lights on and sirens blaring. Right at that moment, however, there were fuzzy pieces of a big puzzle in Varnell's mind, and they were shifting in and out of focus, connecting and flying apart. He had always been something of a dreamer, but it had been years since he had gotten into trouble over it, and trouble had never meant being locked up in the county jail. *Then suddenly a picture of a moonshine still came into focus in his brain.*

"Dad blame it, that's it," he said. Everyone in the county knew about the rumors of McAnnally and moonshine. Some people said he looked the other way in return for a piece of the action; others said he *was* the action.

And some even said that his moonshine operation was somewhere on the park land owned by the county, land that was off limits to the public—land that butted Varnell's property.

"That dad-blamed buzzard problee thinks I'd lead ever-body, friend and foe, up to that park land," said Varnell out loud, *"That's exactly what he thinks.* Newspaper reporters, TV newstypes, and every crazy AFO freak in the county—the state for that matter—all climbing over his dad-blamed moonshine still, looking for Martians. It'd be pretty durned funny if I wudn't laughing frum inside one of his cells. Deputy! Yo, deputy!"

"Stop yer hollerin.' What you want?" Deputy Kenslow came over to the cell, wiping peanut butter off his upper lip.

"I want you to go git the sheriff."

"You want to make a statement?"

"You might say that. Jest go git him."



From the other side of the door, Varnell heard their muffled conversation, but he couldn't make out what was being said. He could tell, however, that someone, probably the sheriff, was loud and upset. Finally, McAnnally slowly rounded the corner and stood outside the cell. "What is it, Varnell?"

"Sheriff, can we talk?" Varnell had calmed down at this point, and had even practiced his speech.

"Why, of course, Varnell. We're all friends here."

"I gotta say, Sheriff, it took me by surprise, you throwin' me in here..."

"You mean in the formal statement room? That was for your own protection, Varnell."

"Look, Sheriff, I got a pretty good idea why I'm in here, and a prettier good idea about why you're so concerned about that park land up by my upper forty."

The relaxed grin left McAnnally's face and was replaced by a forced smile. "Yo, Deputy, gimme your keys a minute."

Kenslow obliged and then stepped back behind the sheriff.

"Give us a minute, Deputy," the sheriff said, turning his massive gaze on the hapless deputy.

Once Kenslow quickly shut the door to the hall leading to the holding pens, McAnnally turned back to Varnell and began fidgeting with the key in the lock. "*Do proceed, Varnell.*"

"Okay. Maybe you got some kind of interest in that property. I don't know. It ain't my business."

"What kind of *interest* do you think I have, Varnell?" The sheriff had the cell door open wide and was leaning against the bars on the inside, almost daring Varnell to make a run for it through the open door.

"Well, there's always been talk..."

"Talk? *What kind of talk*, Varnell?"

"Like I said, it ain't none of my business, but, you know, talk of moonshine."

"Varnell!" MacAnnally said with mock surprise, "This is a *dry* county. And I'm sheriff of this here dry county."

"Sheriff, I ain't accusing nobody of nothing. All I'm saying is if you put me in here..."

"*In protective custody...*"

"...whatever. For whatever reason. If that reason was that you was afraid I was gonna tell folks about what I saw, and those folks started coming up to my pasture and onto the county park land..."

"First of all. I ain't afraid of nothing, 'specially nothing little ol' you could stir up. Secondly, that up there is county land. It is off limits to the people. It is a protected area."

Just then the door leading to the cells opened and a large man in green scrubs with "STAPH STAFF" stenciled on the front stepped under the swinging light bulb in the narrow hall.

"Whoa!" said Varnell turning white, "I ain't no STAPH looney!"

The large man turned his back to Varnell and McAnnally and proceeded to fiddle with something in his attaché case. When he turned, Varnell could barely make out the embroidered type on the back of the man's scrubs: *Southeastern Tennessee Area Psychiatric Hospital*. Varnell opened his mouth to protest, but McAnnally quickly jackhammered his huge fist into Varnell's right arm, spinning him around and driving him to the floor of the cell.

"Just like old times, eh, Varnell?" he said, and then he turned to the huge man in the scrubs. "There. I softened it up for ya."

The small cell was swirling around Varnell's head, and it all went dark for a second, but when he opened his eyes, the man in the scrubs already had the needle in his arm. "Hey! That's not necessary, you!" he said. But the man ignored him and efficiently finished up, wiping

"Sheriff, I ain't accusing nobody of nothing. All I'm saying is if you put me in this cell because you was afraid I was gonna tell folks about what I saw, and those folks started coming up to my pasture and onto the county park land..."

Varnell's arm with an alcohol swab.

"Hey," I said," Varnell complained, rubbing his right arm.

"Go on out there," McAnnally told the man, his back to Varnell. He thumbed in the direction of the outside lobby. "Wait for us. We'll be right out."

The man nodded and collected his attaché, leaving as quickly as he had arrived. Varnell knew he should somehow make his move. *Bust McAnnally in the chops and sail on out of there.* They left the doors open! You could grab his gun... nobody would stop you. But he just sat there staring up at the glaring sheriff.

"Here's the thing, Varnell," the sheriff said slowly. "I gotta hand it to you. I never woulda thought you—of all people—woulda figgered it out, but you wuz right on the money. I do have interests up there. Not too far from your land. In fact, right on the other side of that ridge above your property—just out of sight. And you were right again on the moonshine. We make it and we sell it. But what you *didn't* know is who we sell it to. *That's the big secret.* Or it was the big secret until you saw 'em."

"Saw who?" Varnell said slowly, blinking.

"My biggest clients. And they ain't Martians... they's Venusians."

"Ven-youshee whats?"

"*Venusians*, Varnell. Boys from Venus. *They's a long way from home.* But they love the 'shine. Their ship runs on it! They say it's better than gasoline or diesel, or better even than their nuclear stuff. *Ain't that a hoot!*"

"Hoot?!" Varnell slurred loudly.

"Come on, Varnell, they're waiting."

Varnell slowly got to his feet and walked out of the cell with McAnnally behind him. "This sure turned out to be a real interesting night," he said.

"I hear you," said McAnnally.

Out in the lobby, Varnell was surprised to see Ruby Nell sitting at the sheriff's desk filling out some papers. She was as pretty as the day he married her. Varnella was also there, behind the desk in front of the sheriff's calendar, waving as they walked through. To her right was Billy Tom, and he was tuning his guitar. Some of his long-haired friends were next to him with their banjos and fiddles. Deputy Kenslow had

changed clothes and was playing mandolin on the other side of Billy Tom. They were all dressed alike. Once Varnell and the sheriff got to the middle of the room where the big man in the scrubs stood waiting, the musicians started in on a *Blue Sky Boys* tune as if on cue. "They ain't half bad," Varnell thought. "Matter of fact, they're good...*real good!*"

Behind the musicians, the walls had been freshly painted with a scene of a big oak tree in a grassy field on a beautiful August late afternoon.

And to Varnell's surprise, there was his Aunt Edna under the oak tree, carrying a plate of her fried chicken. "Ain't you been dead ten years, Aunt Edna?" Varnell asked.

"Varnell, you come over here and have a piece of this chicken, and you tell me."

Varnell plopped down on the blanket in the wet grass, and with his fingers laced behind his head, he gazed up dreamily at the afternoon sky. The warm breeze tickled his cheek and hissed through the branches of the big oak tree, shaking loose a lone Mockingbird, whose outstretched wings were lit up by the sinking sun.



Click to hear the song, "Saucers in the Valley":
<http://www.SouthernReader.com/SaucersInTheValley.MP3>

Ghost Stories

By Charlton Walters Hillis

R

obert Winston is a trim man with a boyish energy about him that belies his age, which is seventy-four. Tommie Lee, his wife, is a small woman so sweet and quiet you might mistake her for docile.

Perhaps one of those types who would never want to leave her native Chickamauga, Georgia. But she's already been to Israel, is planning a trip to the Netherlands and dreams of traveling far and wide. Robert met her when he moved to Chickamauga from Valley Head, Alabama (named for its location in Will's Valley—population 611), when he was thirteen years old. Valley Head is only 45 minutes from Chickamauga, but until the other day, he had only been back to his hometown twice, and once was for a funeral. He just never was interested in going back.

Although he never was interested in going back, he never forgot the place. Could not forget it, if he tried. And once the subject of the supernatural comes up, he jumps on it. Promises if I'll come by the house, he'll tell me some ghost stories. Not generic ones but—as he takes off his glasses and points at his own two eyes for emphasis—*things he's seen personally*.

I take him up on the offer and am not disappointed, but on reflection, believe he just might have two different kinds of bogeymen in mind. Not to detract from the ghost stories, mind you. They're on one level, the others on another, less easily shared. I'm a realist, not a writer of the supernatural, and human nature fascinates me. My underlying intention is to write the tale of an ordinary man who lived through extraordinary circumstances.

Once Mr. Winston gets to telling the ghost stories, he seems to be wanting to go back, but only for the purpose of showing someone else where it all happened. Coming off the top of the mountain at Mentone, Alabama, he gets positively excited upon pointing out to me the sign for Valley Head. Many a time, he tells me, he and a buddy hiked the two miles up this mountain to fish at the top. A straight-up trail through

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the woods, at night. *Surely they used a flashlight?* He doesn't remember having one.

We're on our way to Winston Place, now a bed and breakfast, and it isn't hard to find. Back under slavery, they divided up the children of a particular family, with half going to one white home and half to another. Mr. Winston's ancestors went to the Winstons.

By the time he came along, his father, Gus Winston, was a cook at the same house. Grew a little corn in the summer. Raised a family in a little house just across the pasture from the big house. When we drive over later, it's still there. Nobody's home, but it's now guarded by a rottweiler who takes his job very seriously. Pins Robert against the side of his Eldorado, until he cannot even get the door open but finally slips around to the passenger side while my husband slides over to drive.

Before that, though, we go to Winston Place, drive over the railroad tracks which run alongside the main street of Valley Head and up the lane to the rear, where there is a small brick house and a man coming out to meet us. He introduces himself as "Colonel" Matthews, but that turns out to be from Vietnam rather than the Civil War, as one might be ready for, in that setting.

While we wait in the car, Robert steps out to get acquainted, and it doesn't hurt he has a purple heart from his Vietnam days right there on the tag of his car. Colonel Matthews is married to one of the descendants of the original owners, and he is more than happy to

show us around.

Winston Place is a pre-Civil War colonial, 172 years old. He tells us the original house had four bedrooms on each side, which are no longer there. Out back are slave quarters, a corn crib, a barn and a carriage house. The kitchen used to be outside also (Robert remembers it well), but it's gone, and the kitchen inside, although period charming, is a recent development.

Robert isn't familiar with the elegant dining room—he has not had any reason to be in there before. We are taken upstairs through all the bedrooms, and I wonder if he has ever been up there before.

He never says if he has, only, "Talk about ghosts! They wouldn't wait till night to come out here—they'd be right out there in the daytime!"

We began at the rear and end up on the front porch. It's a wide, wrap-around porch with massive Doric columns, and is repeated on the upstairs balcony. The lawn is large and green with big old trees, and you just want to sit down on one of those white wooden chairs and dream. Colonel Matthews tells us the Union army made this its headquarters in the fall of 1863 and spared it, because the owner was a Union sympathizer.

Lingering, looking out across the lawn at the train going by, Tommie Lee tells me about how, when she was in high school, she had to take a train every day to the black school in Lafayette. The government paid for the students' tickets rather than have them in school

Colonel Matthews tells us the Union army made this its headquarters in the fall of 1863 and spared it, because the owner was a Union sympathizer.

with white children. The whole day is a sobering experience for a Southern white girl, and at no point more so than right there on that blinding white porch.

After a down home good dinner at the Tigers Inn, a place that appears not to have changed inside or out for at least forty years (Matthews directed us there, and from the window you can see part of the mansion across the street), we set out to look for the site of Robert's best ghost story. He likes to tell how, not just once or twice or three times, but *many* times, he has stood at the foot of the hill and heard an entire church service—sermon and singing—all coming from the old church building in the woods which also served as the school for black children.

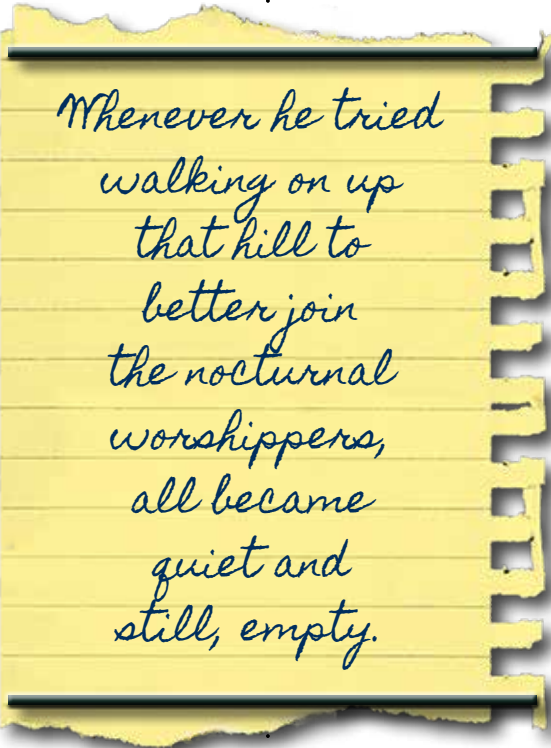
Whenever he tried walking on up that hill to better join the nocturnal worshippers, all became quiet and still, empty. They were still holding services in that building then—on Sunday and the occasional revival meetings, to be sure, but these were on nights when nothing was supposed to have been going on there. He used to take unbelievers there—he was a regular tour guide for the ghosts.

I wonder (but don't ask) about details of the story. What songs were they singing? What was the sermon about? Was it all just a blend of sound and impressions, or was it clear as a bell, and if so, has he understandably forgotten the details?

He is sure it is no longer standing, but Matthews just this morning said it was.

Robert drives to where he thinks it ought to be, but has trouble finding it. Along the way he points out a particular house. This is where, he says, more than once was discovered a small fire burning on the back stoop where no fire should have been. When the owner was alerted, he did not appear alarmed, but rather, resigned to it. Eventually, this man in his 80s went out and sat down at an outdoor table and shot himself.

Finally, Robert pulls up into a yard to ask directions to the old church building. A man is working in the yard, and there is a Confederate flag on his parked truck. It occurs to me he might be asking the wrong fellow, and it will be the rottweiler all over again. But the man is most helpful, even gets in his truck and drives ahead to show us. It is all there up in the woods on that hill, overgrown



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with brush but intact.

We stand in the driveway with our guide, who stays and shares some local history. Robert had told me before that almost anyone in Valley Head could *and would* tell you ghost stories. This man, Gary, is a confirmed realist. He has no interest in our ghost stories. He is a *just-the-facts* sort of guy. After a few subtle tries on the subject, though, Robert has him telling us about a close friend of his who was awakened by the ghost of his own dead mother checking to see if he was covered on a cold night. Things like that are not for Gary, but he is not one to doubt the word of a friend.

Several times during the day, I regret having forgotten my camera. Robert says he

seriously considered bringing his but decided against it. He's not sure he wants pictures in the house that would cause him to wake up in the night with nightmares. I remember his disinterest in going back to Valley Head all those years, and thoughts of Jim Crow era horror tales are looming in the back of my mind, and I'm wondering if he's not talking ghosts anymore.

It takes me a while to get up the courage to press him further on the subject. If he has not already said more, it might be he thinks I would not be interested. When I do finally ask, several weeks later, he seems ready to spill the beans. We all meet over Sunday dinner at the Plantation Restaurant in Chickamauga, Georgia, a nondescript little place with great home cooking and real biscuits.

I haven't brought my notebook and wonder if there will be enough napkins to write on, but it turns out there's no need for either. Mr. Winston has been laughing at me, waiting for me to ask, sensing my questions. And he doesn't have a thing to tell me; neither one of them does.

"Guess I'm not giving you much to write about," he laughs. Raised in a north Alabama hamlet in the thirties, and in the forties in a small town in Georgia—site and name of a most famous Civil War battle and to this day proudly entrenched in its own history—this gentleman of African American heritage can tell me of no more than segregated schools and sitting in the balcony of the movie theater the one time he remembers going to a movie (it was "Gone with the Wind").

Those situations at that time seemed so normal to him, they went unquestioned. His father and his mother made respectively one dollar a day and fifty cents a day, but he never went hungry. They raised their children to work, so that Robert was making his own money by the age of eleven. He says he never felt afraid walking out at night on his many boyish adventures (the exception being when he heard voices crying in the cemetery), never was a victim of racial cruelty. Tommie Lee's is a similar experience.

So aside from the ghosts, it's a non-story. Or is it? Maybe it ought to be spread widely so that out of the smoke of Mississippi burning and all the other too real horror tales of racism of all colors, will stand a testament to a brighter America. It's a part of our history often made out to be as doubtful as ghost stories, far from perfect but weighing heavily in favor of decent, freedom loving individuals, subject to change, and improve without rewriting history. That's better than a tale of the supernatural, any day.



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.

*He's not sure he
wants pictures in
the house that would
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with nightmares.*

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Joining the 'Club'

by Stephen Hyder

In early 1959, I started the second half of second grade at Rock Hill School, located across Tennessee Highway 70 (Striggersville Road) with a view of the north end of the rising Devil's Nose. It was rural, and it was a "country school."

There was one room for each class. My teacher was Mrs. Hurd, and my third grade teacher was Mrs. Johnson.

We had moved to what is now 115 Price Lane, off Laurel Branch Road, which ran off Tennessee Highway 94, the Pressmen's Home Road, just before it turned into Horseshoe Bend Mountain, right at the entrance to Pressmen's Home. My urban focus, such as it was, Rogersville, was 10 miles away, so we were acclimated to living in the country and having our King's English (diligently pounded into us by our mother) thoroughly slaughtered by a few of our new-found classmates, among them Hershel Williams, Danny Burdine, Dale Ferrell (who lived in Elbow City), Hugh Kyle Miner, Marilyn and Carolyn Seals, Ruby Buttry,

Rudy Alvis, Larry Siddons, Dwayne Gibson, Steve Adams, Jackie Williams, and my best friend, Jackie Lee Riley.

We Hyder boys were Cub Scouts and proud of it, but our school friends knew little about scouting, except that me and brother David Hyder would wear our uniforms to school once a week and get to leave school early, so that Mom could pick us up to carry us to our Den Meeting on Circle Drive in Rogersville at Mrs. Noah Britton's house. She was our Den Mother. Afterwards, we walked downtown to Dad's law office (and in the process negotiated our way across what was then "Bloody Eleven-W" before the by-pass was built and then the four-lane) and he would take us back home to the country.

One time, Jackie Riley invited me to spend the night at his house the night before a *Cub Scout Day* for me, so I took my uniform with me to put on the next morning. It was a big deal for me to wear that uniform to school. We got “oohs” and “ahhs” from our classmates, and they would cut us a wide berth on those days. So when morning came at Jackie’s house, I carefully dressed and put on my little blue Cub Scout beanie with the gold stripes on it, the blue and gold neckerchief with the brass slide, looked in the mirror and gave the Cub Scout sign to myself, ready for the day. I walked out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, where Jackie, his brother, Bernie Joe, and his Dad, Burkett, were waiting for Mrs. Riley to serve the grits, eggs, bacon, country ham and biscuits. Mrs. Riley turned to me with a shining smile on her face and said, with much glee in her voice, “Well, look at little Stevie, all dressed up in his *Club Scout* uniform!!!”

It was a big deal for me to wear that uniform to school. We got “oohs” and “ahhs” from our classmates, and they would cut us a wide berth on those days.

I could not have been more mortified by what she said, and demurred, “But, Mrs. Riley, it’s not ‘*Club*’ Scout—it’s *Cub Scout*!” She kept right on smiling at me. Mr. Riley just chuckled and told me to eat my breakfast, because the school bus would be stopping out at the road soon to carry us to school. Jackie had boasted to me a while back that his Dad had been a “Chief Petty Officer, Second Class” in the Navy; surely he knew the importance of uniforms. But it was a very good day at school and at my Den Meeting. There were a slew of “*Circle Driveans*” in our Den, among them John and Ben Chambers, David Britton, Edward Graham, David Koger, Doug Pearson, and Larry Lollar—all members of *The Club*.



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

SHINING A LIGHT INTO THE DARKNESS.

Church Behind the Walls

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Modern-Day Steel Magnolias

By Ron Burch

W

Today's Steel
Magnolias didn't
come from Tara or
the Magnolia
grandiflora—they
come from an illicit
relationship between
Ouiser Boudreaux
and Jimmy Hoffa.

What are they? They're *Southern Belles* gone bad. Unlike the *Steel Magnolias* featured in the 1989 American comedy of the same name, today's Steel Magnolia is a woman with an attitude—a woman that had just as soon *cut you as look at you*

To her, and all those like her, men are bad—single-minded perverts, disposables that you discard after one use. Smelly bags of gas that love to drink beer and burp while watching an endless array of football games.

I see a lot of these modern-day *Steel Magnolias*. They're all over the suburban area where I live. They let their kids run wild at my favorite restaurant. They're at the mall in low slung designer jeans just daring me to gawk at their bare midriff. They're at the grocery with their rug rats in tow. They're at the Post Office. They're up and down our highways and blocking the busy intersections in town. Worst of all, they're the cheerleaders for backyard fireworks shot off way past my bedtime on July 4th and on New Year's Eve.

I've traced their roots. Today's *Steel Magnolias* didn't come from Tara or the Magnolia grandiflora. They don't grow



on trees. Rather they come from an illicit relationship between *Ouiser Boudreaux* and *Jimmy Hoffa*, now inbred with their lawyer and stockbroker husbands from *New Freakin' Jersey*. What's worse, they're multiplying like rabbits.

Today's *Steel Magnolias* and their abrupt Yankee spouses are turning the Old South's reputation for warm, friendly, good-natured people upside down. For decades, outsiders marveled at the charm and gracious manners of Southerners. They appreciated our hospitality, our low-key, laid-back lifestyle, the warm smile of a *Southern Belle* in a modest sundress, crops in the field, SEC football, and Southern cooking.

Not anymore.

Now, when we open a door for one of these *Steel Magnolias*, we're stared down. When we step aside to let her board an elevator or an escalator before we do, they look at us as though we're handicapped. When we smile and say "good morning" to one we pass in the mall, you'd think she'd just seen our picture on the Internet list of sexual predators.

Gone is the friendly wave when we allow someone to make a turn in front of us, or give them access to our lane of traffic. Gone is the free pass to the cash register when we have two items and they have two buggies full. Sadly, many former *Southern Belles* are turning into one of today's *Steel Magnolias*, too.

They idolize Gloria Steinem—they've

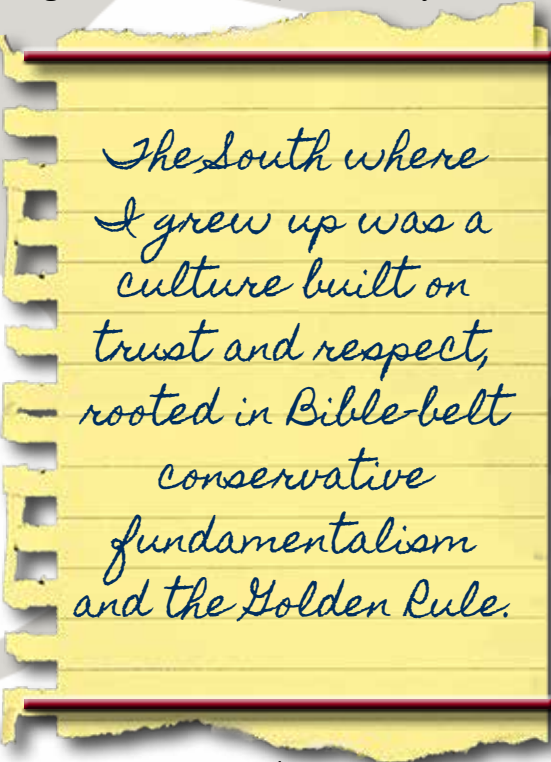
discovered their car horn, also their middle finger. Many are packing heat. On our interstates, they ignore the posted speed limit. They push their 400-hp, foreign-made, road-hugger to the limit, whether the race is into the city or simply to the next exit.

On the back roads, soccer moms in minivans and SUVs rule. A white, magnetic soccer ball or hockey stick mounted on the rear of the vehicle makes them easy to spot. They're the ready reserve for the *Steel Magnolias*. Cell

phones glued to their ear (even though it's against the law in Georgia), it's not uncommon for a half dozen or more of these suburban road warriors to pass under a traffic light long after it turns red; to line up ten deep on the wrong side of the road a hundred yards from the intersection, just to get into the left turn lane. Or to breach the gore midway down the entrance ramp to an interstate highway.

Although these *Steel Magnolias* may soon outnumber *Southern Belles*, in the changing southern landscape, all isn't lost. Each week, local TV features a number of stories about human kindnesses—the return of a lost wallet with its contents intact, help to change a tire, jump-starting a car with a dead battery. All are benevolent acts of modern-day *Southern Good Samaritans*.

The South where I grew up was a culture built on trust and respect, rooted in Bible-belt conservative fundamentalism and the Golden



The South where
I grew up was a
culture built on
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rooted in Bible-belt
conservative
fundamentalism
and the Golden Rule.

Rule. The aggressive behavior of these hybrids threatens to change that culture—especially in the urban areas. Perhaps it's a sign of the times, but the softness is gone from the voices on local radio and television. Close your eyes and you could be anywhere in the USA. All talent sounds alike. Here in Atlanta, it's common to mispronounce local thoroughfares like "Houston Street," "Ponce de Leon Avenue" and "Mansell Road." Divisive political commentary has replaced a folksy talk radio favorite of the '70s and '80s, when the most controversial subject matter was a discussion on the best way to remove squirrels from an attic.

A local police chief recently went on record as saying that his city has become one of the meanest cities in the nation. Robbery, home invasions, carjackings, drive-by shootings, drug deals and gang-related crimes occur

around here about as often as they do in Hoboken, Los Angeles or Detroit. Doors that at one time went unlocked, now have deadbolts. Many also have iron burglar bars. Most everyone has theft deterrent systems on their cars as well as monitored alarms in their homes and businesses.

That isn't to say that the *Old South* with its *Good Old Boys* and *Southern Belles* was without its flaws. In fact, there were many. For years, vigilante justice was the *only* justice. For years, local laws and ordi-

nances made second-class citizens of an entire race. For years, good old boy cronyism and kickbacks dominated southern politics. Now—at least in the central city—instead of the *Good Old Boys*, a new majority rules, with mixed results.

I suppose change is inevitable—some good, some bad. Someone said, "Change is not true reform any more than noise is music." Another said, "Do not fear change, for it is an unchangeable law of progress." I just wish

that our Southern way of life had had as much influence on the northern newcomers as their way of life has had on us.

A South that combines the warmth, friendliness and good manners of the old South, with new and better ways of doing things would be unbeatable, as would an old-fashioned *Southern Belle* with a smile. Today's *Steel Magnolias* no longer grace the

lawns of Southern Mansions or sip mint juleps. Instead, each morning, many of them navigate their four-ton SUVs down the interstate to their big chair in the executive suite.



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.

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