

Southern Reader

AN ONLINE MAGAZINE ABOUT LIFE IN THE SOUTH

The Summer of '69

A life-changing season



Finding Margo

A short story by Charlton Hillis

The Color of Forgiveness

A true story of conflict and healing

Life's a Beach and Then...

Lisa Love's continuing saga

The Guacamole Tower

A boyhood memoir

Blood on the Ground

An excerpt from Merle Temple's latest book

The Golden Sound of Silence

Ron Burch weighs in

David Skinner



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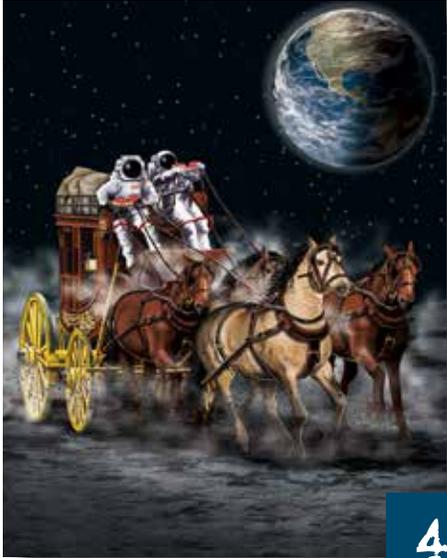
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Space Cowboys

By David Ray Skinner

T

his summer marked the 50th anniversary of the first person to walk on the moon. Most of us who were alive that July day in 1969 remember where we were and who we were with as we watched that amazing event unfold on TV.

I was at my cousins' house at a neighboring Nashville suburb; we had been swimming in their backyard pool, and we stopped to gather around their television to watch in awe as Neil Armstrong stepped into history. That was also the summer before my senior year in high school. I had wanted to go to Woodstock that summer, but my parents looked at me like I was crazy when I suggested it. They then broke out in prolonged laughter, thinking I was punking them with my request. Consequently, I opted to travel to Pittsburgh with a youth group from my church to help set up a Vacation Bible School in nearby Beaver Falls. Between a lunar walk, a 500,000-person rock festival and a Pennsylvania VBS, it was quite a summer.

A few years later, as a college art major (with an emphasis in watercolor painting, mind you) I was trying to decide what my next painting would be when I stumbled onto a stash of my dad's *National Geographic* magazines. One issue featured

Between a lunar walk, a 500,000-person rock festival and a Pennsylvania VBS, it was quite a summer.





a pictorial account of the lunar walk; another included pictures from a rodeo. There was cattle roping, bronco riding, gunfight re-enactments and a genuine Wells Fargo stagecoach. I gathered up the *NatGeo* issues and brought them back to school with me to use as reference pictures for my paintings. One afternoon as they lay scattered on the floor of my little college art studio, I noticed that the rodeo issue with its stagecoach centerspread had somehow landed on top of the moonwalk cover. Even back then I loved strange and unexpected juxtapositions and it looked like it would be fun to paint as a watercolor.

However, when I presented the finished piece to my art professor, he studied it carefully with a squint and a grimace.

"I'd love to give you an 'A'," he said, "but there is no oxygen on the moon—those horses would never survive, much less be able to pull a stagecoach without air to breathe."

"Uh...no problem; they're robots," I said.

"Oh," he said, reluctantly, "In that case, great job."

Okay. So now, it's more than four decades later, and all my tubes of watercolors have long since dried up, and I've traded pigments for pixels. Once I saw that we were coming up on the 50th Anniversary of Neil Armstrong's historic walk, I thought it would be fun to "re-enact" my watercolor painting from all those years ago—only this time, I'd paint it on my Mac.

I started the illustration in Adobe Illustrator and exported it (in layers) to Photoshop. It's a paradox in that it's both different and similar to the original painting. Plus, this one continues the *SouthernReader* watermelon theme that we've used on every cover since the inaugural issue back in the Summer of 2001.

However, I can almost hear my old college art professor saying with a scowl, "How can those astronauts possibly eat their slices of watermelon? They're wearing helmets!"

Uh...no problem; they're holograms.



"...those horses would never survive, much less be able to pull a stagecoach without air to breathe."

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Life's a Beach and Then You...

(fill in the blank)

An unpleasant memory from the past by Lisa Love

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

The Summer of 1978 had started out with such promise; I was 17 years old, the weather was hot, and we were planning our annual summer trip to St. Petersburg, Florida. Every year, my parents rented a place on the beach for about ten days, and that summer was no exception. As usual, though, there was a little fly in my ointment. The week before we were scheduled to leave for Florida, my sister, Debbie had sent me an SOS call; she was starting a new job and could I please keep the kids for a week until she found permanent childcare? Being the good sister that I was, my first response was, "Uhm-m-m-m-m...NO!" Deb's kids at that time were 7, 5, and 3 years old, and though I adore them now, back then, mutual toleration might best describe our relationship. I was a teenager; they were messy, germ-laden children...'nuff said. My mind quickly changed when Mom agreed that I could take a friend with me to St. Pete IF I helped my sister. Bribery?

Manipulation? You betcha, but both are a mama's prerogative, and they worked beautifully. I agreed (surrendered?) to her terms.

As with anything I set my mind to, I attacked this "Auntie Daycare" with great gusto. I made lists, brought craft supplies and planned activities—really, *how hard could it be watching three kids?* (Ah, the ignorance and arrogance of youth!) I had planned special projects and outings to appeal to each one of them and their varied interests.

Bill, 7, was my little "Professor"—he was so certain that he already knew more than any three adults combined. He could grate my nerves till my right eye twitched—but I adored him!

Heather, 5, suffered from middle-child syndrome. She was sullen and petulant if she was with her siblings, yet delightful and charming when we were alone together. She thrived with one-on-one attention and during those moments would reward you with a flash of her dimples!

That leaves my little Missy, 3—the baby with the perpetual pacifier plugging her pie-hole! She didn't speak till she was 5 (didn't need to, she had the pacifier!); I had it pretty easy with her—she *was* and *is*, an angel on earth.

So, with personalities analyzed and my lists, graphs and charts at the ready, I set out to show the world how this babysitting thing should be done!

On my first morning there, I told my sister

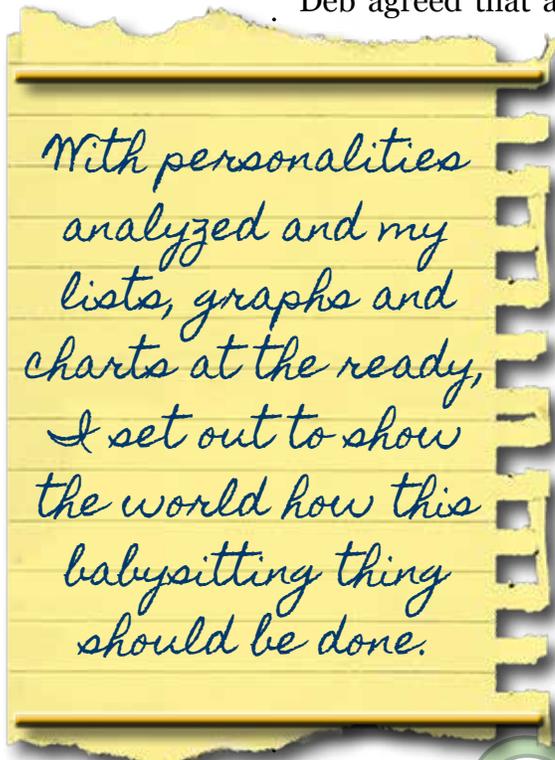
that I planned to take the kids to Red Top Mountain for a little fun in the sun. Red Top was about 10 miles from their house, and it was more than a mountain; it also featured a man-made lake surrounded by a sandy beach. Okay, maybe it wasn't in the same world-class beach category as those wonderful stretches of sand in St. Pete, but I figured it would work as a consolation prize to distract my charges that hot summer day. Our family had often gone there together for picnics and swimming, and Deb agreed that a "trip to the beach" would

be lovely. As she left for work with a wave and a smile, I could have sworn that I heard her mutter, "Good Luck!" under her breath, but, good sport sister that I was, I waved back as she backed out of the driveway.

I made sandwiches for our picnic lunch, and then got the kids out of bed. After a healthy breakfast (at that point I was thinking I could really be good at this mothering thing!), I fed their dog

and cleaned the kitchen while they watched cartoons. This was gonna be a piece of cake!

But...*hold that thought!* Bill ran into the kitchen screaming, "Wisi, (that was his 7-year-old interpretation and pronunciation of "Lisa") come quick and see the new trick I taught Wisk." As I followed Bill into the living room, I watched the dog scooting her furry bottom across the carpet from one end of the room to the other. I highly doubted this was a newly acquired skill of Wisk's; I leaned down beside her to take a closer look. How



With personalities analyzed and my lists, graphs and charts at the ready, I set out to show the world how this babysitting thing should be done.

do I put this delicately? Coming out of Wisk's backside was a furry green thread—and it was driving that poor dog crazy. I wanted to help her, but didn't actually want to, well, touch... ANYTHING!

As quick thinking has always been my forte, I dashed into the kitchen and came back wearing Platex rubber gloves, swim goggles and wielding barbecue tongs in my left hand. Telling the kids to back away and close their eyes, I "tonged" the thread and started to pull...and pull...

and pull. And pull and pull and pull! The long green thread just kept coming out like scarves from a magician's sleeve!

I was both appalled and yet, oddly fascinated at the same time by the never-ending string—whose color, by the way, strongly resembled that of the indoor/outdoor carpet on my sister's porch. After extracting about 13 yards of the endless yarn from Wisk—enough to knit a car cover for my '74

Pinto (don't laugh, she was a sweet ride!)—I was startled by an urgent knocking at the back door. *Who/what in the world...?*

Heart pounding, I jumped up from my doggie ministrations and threw open the door to find Joan, a friend of Debbie's, looking decidedly worse for wear. As she burst into the house followed by a gaggle of children, I noticed she was frantic. "Where's Debbie?" she breathlessly asked, but then she answered her own query with, "Oh yeah, the new job, right?" As she paced to and fro, she pro-

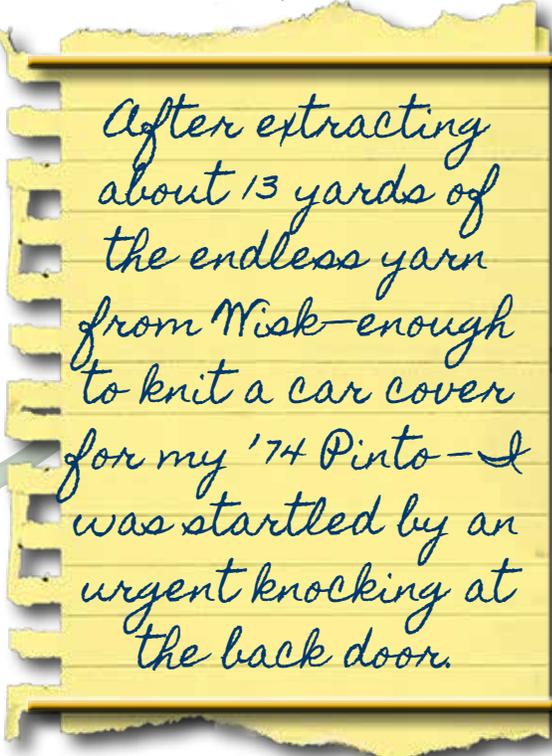
claimed, "Well Lisa, I need a huge favor and you will just have to do." Obviously, Joan had not taken notes during *Southern Etiquette and the Art of Asking Favors 101!* She told me she needed to leave her daycare children with me while she rushed her mother-in-law to the doctor. Wait a minute...*her daycare children?*

I had always been slightly bemused that the state of Georgia let Joan keep her own children, much less tend to anyone else's in

her home. Joan thrived on chaos and disorder. Does that sound mean? Well, here was a case in point: She had now been standing in Deb's house for about five minutes while the six—no, make that seven, kids she brought in, plus my three nieces and nephews—chased a scared, barking dog with a skein of green yarn coming out of her backside, all the while I was talking to her wearing the aforementioned Playtex rubber gloves, swim goggles, and

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

Nevertheless, it was an emergency, and she was my sister's friend, so I mumbled a pitiful, "Okay, I guess." I then managed to squeak out that I had planned to take the kids to the lake that morning, wherein she piped up that she had assorted swim suits in a bin in the back



After extracting about 13 yards of the endless yarn from Wisk—enough to knit a car cover for my '74 Pinto—I was startled by an urgent knocking at the back door.



of her stationwagon. Great! I had kinda *hoped against hope* that the idea of a 17-year-old girl taking TEN young children to the beach *might have given her pause!* Nope! She just ran out to her car and brought back the bin-o'-suits, shouting a quick, "*I'll see you when I see you*" over her shoulder, and she was off.

Feeling a wee bit flustered, I stood and observed the bedlam that Joan left in her wake. *Mental note to self: "First, NEVER ANSWER THAT DOOR AGAIN!*

Secondly, finish my 'knitting project' with Wisk." Once

that unwieldy job was completed, I sent

kids to find everyone a swimsuit

that fit. As I sorted through Joan's bin,

handing the swim apparel out left and

right, I tried to coax names out of the kids, but

to no avail. I didn't blame them, they all looked like deer in headlights; *they were just as much fish out of water as I was at that moment.* Fingers crossed, I hoped they would warm up to me—most people usually did—eventually!

Anyway, after the suits were chosen and extra sandwiches were made for the picnic, I had Bill and Heather help me load up the car. This in itself was no easy task—remember, the aforementioned '74 Pinto Hatchback was my auto of choice! I stuffed the kids into the Pinto like a pack of wild monkeys in the clown car at a circus! NO car seats—NO seat belts. (Of course, there were no seatbelt laws back then!) But looking back on it, we were stuffed in there so tight that nothing short of a head-on collision could have dislodged anyone of

us, anyway.

I glanced at my watch as we pulled onto the highway—almost noon. I had planned to get to the lake by 10:00 AM so that the kids could swim and play a couple of hours before the picnic lunch. Best laid plans, right? As I tried to shift the schedule around in my head, one of the little boys started to cry. "Oh please, no!" I thought to myself, "Hadn't the day been hard enough already?" I put on my "calm"

voice and said, "Sweetie, we are going to the lake,

and we are going to have the bestest time

ever! We're gonna make sand castles

and have a picnic, and I

even brought some candy

for after lunch.

SO PLEASE QUIT CRYING!" He

stuck his thumb in his mouth, stared out the window and the rest of

the ride was uneventful. Another note to self—

not only does bribery and manipulation work for mamas with their teenagers...they are also

a babysitter's most effective tool in her quest for *PEACE AND QUIET!*

Once we got to the lake, Bill and Heather tried their level best to help me pry the kids

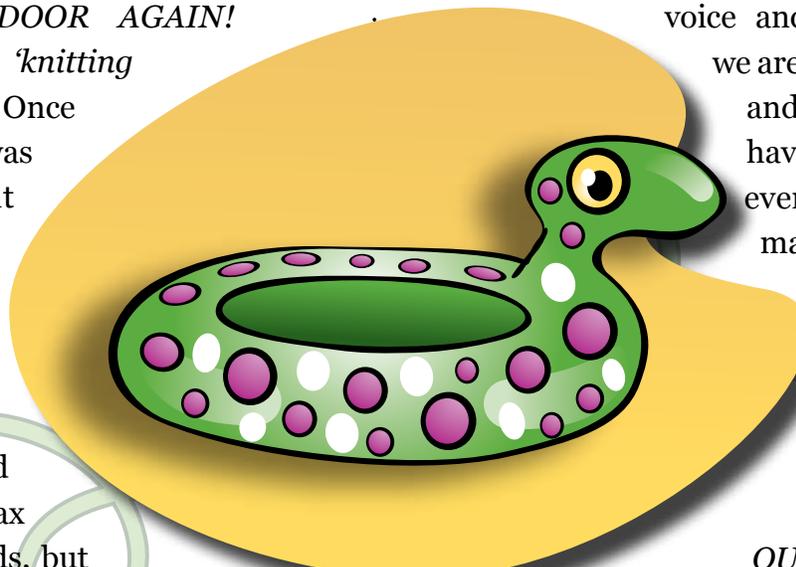
out of the back seat and hatchback. Holding the smaller ones in my arms, having the older

ones hold onto the hem of my cover-up, and carrying our beach accessories to the water

took more skill and precision than the "Flying Wallendas" ever dreamed of! I laid out our

blanket and started pulling things out of my magic bag of goodies. I handed out pails,

shovels, bubble-blowers and sippy cups. For



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

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

After lunch, the kids wanted to head back into the water, but I thought we should head home. The sun was scorching and the one thing I forgot to bring in my magic bag of goodies was sunscreen. We were all getting a bit pink, so I made the executive decision that it was time to go. In my defense, if we had gotten to the lake when I originally planned, we would have been home before the noonday sun attacked us! Again, we all trudged back to the car, and I stuffed the kids back into their assigned places—the only difference was that we were covered in sand and were hot and sweaty AND feeling the

beginnings of a nasty sunburn! It seemed to take twice as long to get back to Deb's as it seemed to get to the lake. As I pulled onto our street, I noticed a lady going from house to house; it looked like she had just left Deb's. I could see a pamphlet she had left tucked into the screen door. Sorry, but with everything going on, I surely didn't have the time or the inclination to deal with an Avon lady.

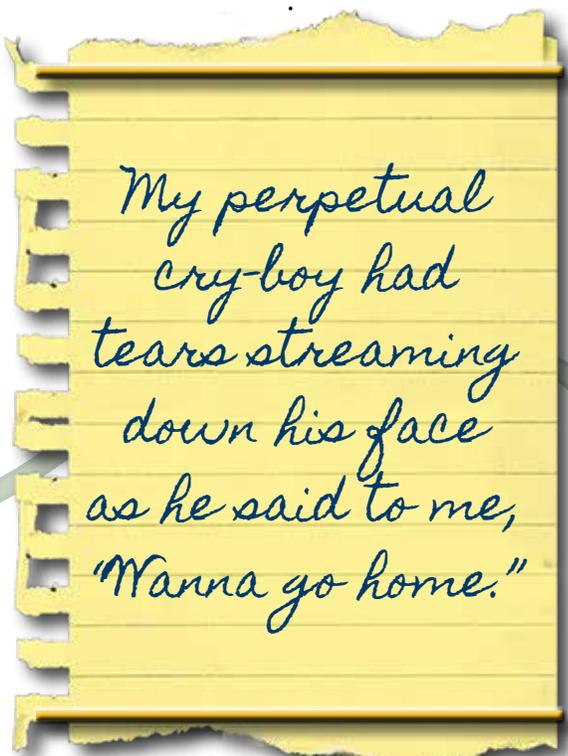
After I got all ten of the kids inside, I asked Heather to grab the lady's brochure off of the front door. I then bumped up the air conditioning a notch, and got the shriveled children out of the still-wet swimsuits. *Oh my!* Some of the little ones were really pink...I mean, *lobster pink*. I rummaged thru Deb's medicine cabinet and came up with some Aloe Vera lotion to rub on their arms, legs and noses.

Heather came in the bathroom and told me she put the paper from the door on the coffee table; she said it was about a missing dog. "Well, we can always give them Wisk," I sighed to myself.

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

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

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



My perpetual cry-boy had tears streaming down his face as he said to me, "Wanna go home."

soon, and that I knew his sunburn must hurt something awful.

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

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

However, that didn’t satisfy *Cry-Boy*. He started wailing. “Wanna go home!” he screamed. He jumped out of the bed and made a run for the front door. I grabbed onto his shirt from behind and scooped him up before he could make his getaway. I was pretty sure I would never hear the end of it if I lost one of the kids. *Escape? Not on my watch!!!* I carried him back to the bedroom as he kicked and screamed, “Wanna go home, Wanna go home!!!”

I laid him back down by the other boys, covered him with a sheet and tried to soothe him. “You’ll be going home soon, I promise,

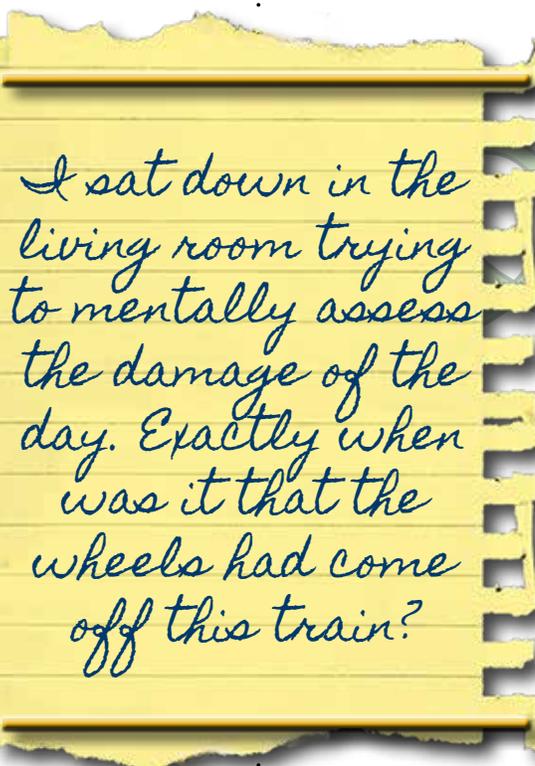
little one.”

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

you’re not even supposed to be here either! This is all Miss Joan’s fault.” I looked down into *Cry-Boy*’s face and saw that he had finally drifted off for his nap. Drying my eyes, I quietly stepped out of the room and pulled the door almost shut.

I sat down in the living room trying to mentally assess the damage of the day. *Exactly when was it that the wheels had come off this train?* Was it when Wisk had eaten enough green indoor/

outdoor carpet to weave an indoor arena football field? In my own defense, I had handled that crisis the best I could...(I even saved the thread in a Ziploc bag, because Bill asked if he could take it to Vacation Bible School for *Show and Tell*...was I a rocking aunt or what?). Or, was it when Joan had descended upon me with a hoard of children that I certainly had not planned on entertaining that day? MY plan had been to take the nieces and nephew to the lake, so our first day together would be fun and memorable. Hmmm, memorable? *Check!*



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She adamantly shook her head and said, “No, I only have the six kids here. Remember when I walked in, I told you that you sure had a housefull, didn’t I?”

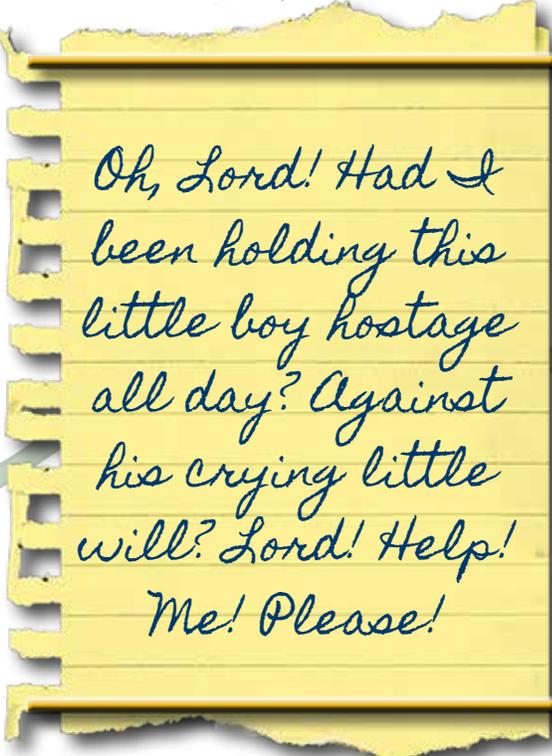
“I had a housefull *AFTER* you got here,” I shrieked back at her, “Before you came, it was just me and Deb’s kids!”

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

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

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

I took Cry-Boy by his hand and ran out to



Oh, Lord! Had I been holding this little boy hostage all day? Against his crying little will? Lord! Help! Me! Please!

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

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

As chaotic and discom-
bulated as Joan could
be most of the time, she seemed to be doing a good job relaying to the police officers the innocence of what had occurred. They all theorized that Cry-Boy (excuse me, *Max*—by then, he had a name) had wandered off from his yard, joined Joan’s daycare kids as she unloaded them from her car and he then just walked into the house with them. Joan had thought he was with me; I thought he was one of hers. My stomach started to unclench a bit. Then I vaguely recall seeing Heather show the Ziploc bag with the green thread in it to

a female officer as she proudly announced, “Aunt Wisi pulled this out of my dog’s butt today. Her says we can take it to *Show and Tell* at church!” Stomach re-clenching! Then I saw Joan and the officers laughing and hugging their sides. Well...that had to be a good sign, didn’t it? Maybe they all saw this as the screwball comedy that it was!

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

It was at that exact moment with all eyes on me and the police officers no longer laughing, that I realized this particular beach of a day was still not quite over, and I sighed to myself, “Yeah, vertical stripes’ll work just fine.”



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.

I saw Joan and the officers laughing and hugging their sides. Maybe they all saw this as the screwball comedy that it was!

That Was The Year That Was

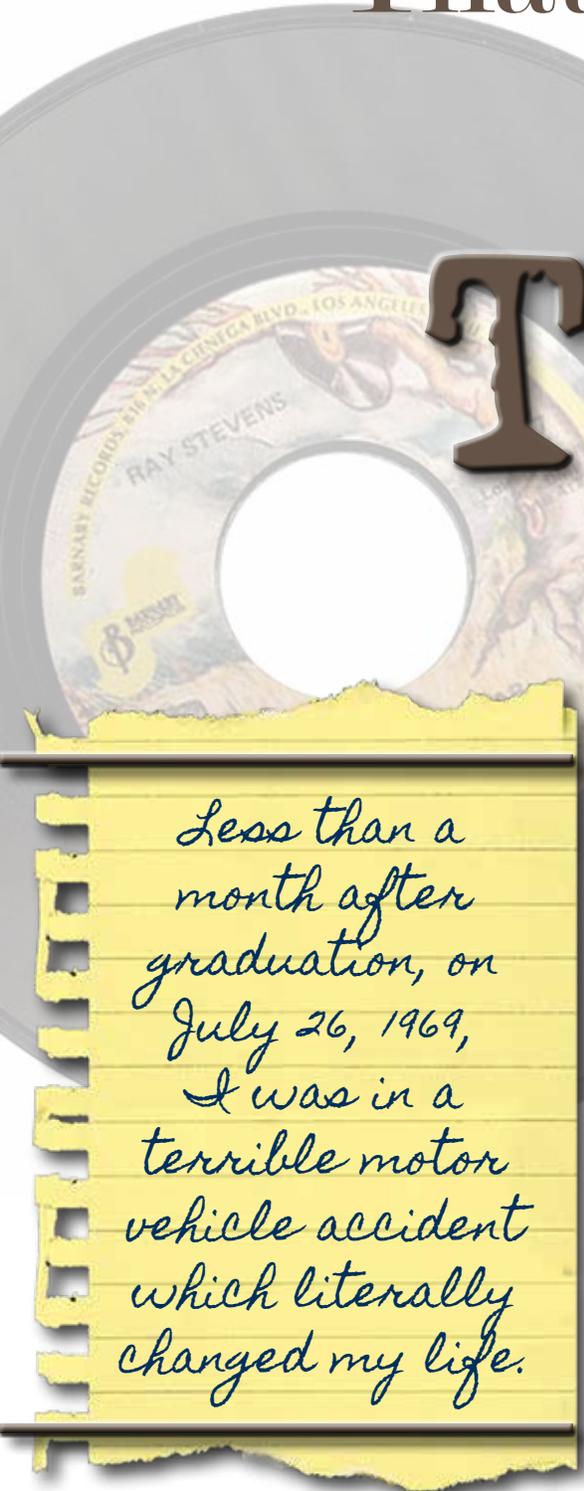
By Stephen Hyder

This year of 2019 is an anniversary year, the 50th, of America's space shot to the moon and the heroes who were part of the various missions who walked on the lunar surface.

Like everybody else in that decade, I witnessed it and other momentous events on the television, like the aftermath of the assassinations of Jack and Bobby Kennedy, the Beatles' appearance on the "Ed Sullivan Show," and the Vietnam War, and obviously, that was not all. Remember "Hullabaloo" or "That Was The Week That Was"?

But 1969 holds more for me, personally. I had graduated from high school the previous month and was headed to East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee the coming fall, but less than a month after graduation, on July 26, 1969, I was in a terrible motor vehicle accident which literally changed my life. I was struck on the right jaw by a fence board coming through the front windshield which bounced through my right collar bone, resulting in severe brain contusions, destruction of my facial 7th nerve and putting me in a coma for three weeks. For a while, I had to wear a tracheotomy tube to help in breathing, but the device, significantly, kept me from talking.

I remember that startling moment, upon reaching a bit of consciousness, and looking at my face in a hand mirror while laying in the hospital bed. I was a mess. I was heavily medicated, but that did not shield any implications at all. I had been seriously injured and was lucky to be alive. The team of



Less than a month after graduation, on July 26, 1969, I was in a terrible motor vehicle accident which literally changed my life.

doctors at Holston Valley Community Hospital in Kingsport, Tennessee had painted a “realistic” prognosis to keep hopes from building up: “He’ll be a vegetable for the rest of his life;” “It is likely that he’ll never regain consciousness;” “If he wakes up, most likely he won’t know anybody or anything.” So, it

behoved my parents to do what they could to generate or facilitate progress. As I regained consciousness and “processed” my circumstances, I first felt overwhelming guilt from causing such fear, anxiety and concern to my family and friends. Then, I realized that I was physically messed up—I couldn’t use my left arm or leg at all and I had a real mess of scars on the right side of my face. Back then, there was no *Americans with*

Disabilities Act; traumatic brain injury science was in its infancy; and importantly, I completely lost the ability to play the guitar which, to this day, is a bee in my bonnet and a constant source of annoyance. What makes it worse is that in my memory, I specifically remember all of the guitar chords I played and can transfer them to a piano, played one-handed, of course. I hated being in the hospital and being out of commission until I started at Carson-Newman College in the Fall of 1970. Going off to college was a relief more than anything else.

I remember arriving home from the hospital in West Hills in Rogersville shortly before Halloween 1969, eager to see if I could still play

guitar after having much physical therapy in the hospital. Spasticity had not yet set in my left hand, and I picked up the “Thunderstick,” an early 1960s copper-colored Tosca Supro electric guitar, and actually played the lead guitar break to “Louie, Louie” by the Kingsmen. I was so relieved, but that relief quickly faded when

I tried to play it again. I couldn’t. My fingers would not do what I wanted them to do. That was a bit of cruelty.

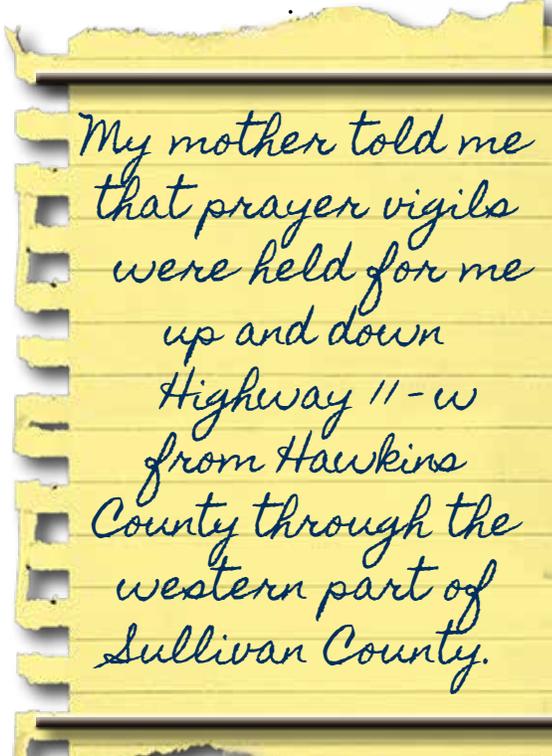
I am, however, truly grateful for the support I received from my friends in high school, with whom I had graduated a mere month earlier; several stood sentry at the hospital, monitoring my progress with my family. Their dedication was amazing. It truly was.

My mother told me that prayer vigils were held for me up and down Highway 11-W from Hawkins County through the western part of Sullivan County for my recovery and safety, and therein is the proof of the utility of prayer. Of course, this defies a ranking; it’s everything.

The circumstances of my accident made *Page One* of the *Rogersville Review*.

This was in the late ’60’s, before being “disabled” became the status symbol, or one of them, in the 1980’s and beyond, and I wondered, “*What the heck am I gonna do now?*”

My mother, bless her heart, established the high mark for me to meet. “It doesn’t matter, Stephen,” she told me many times, “whatever



My mother told me that prayer vigils were held for me up and down Highway 11-W from Hawkins County through the western part of Sullivan County.

it is you set your mind to do, you can *and will* do it.”

So, early on, I had a very good support system. My dad approached my hospital bed with a legal pad and pen in hand, ready to have me write. Lying flat on my back, he laid the pad on my chest and handed me the pen.

“Write, Steve.” he enjoined me, “write anything. I want to take it to (my neurosurgeon) Dr. Nichols and show him how you’re doing.”

Dr. James Nichols, a graduate of Carson-Newman, had done brain surgery on me. My brain started swelling, due to the impact of that board and he drilled “burr holes” in my cranium to reduce the pressure. Sounded like pretty serious stuff to me, so Dr. Nichols and the rest of the crew monitoring my status were due for some relief.

“Just write, Steve,” Dad said, so I wrote. Writing like that took practice because I couldn’t see what I was writing. I was flat on your back looking at the ceiling, so I had to visualize my hand making the letters, and what I wrote required some concentration and concerted effort. Obviously, I made my point:

“Does your chewing gum lose its flavor on the bedpost overnight?”

Although it took a few seconds for Dad to process this, he quickly took the scribbled note to Dr. Nichols, who chucklingly remarked, “Well, I think your boy’s going to be all right.”

I had no idea that this song was a hit for

pre-Beatles British musician Lonnie Donegan, which rose to Number 5 on the US *Billboard* Hot 100 in 1961, but I distinctly remembered that the song was alluded to by country comedian Ray Stevens in his hit “*Ahab The Arab* (the sheik of the burning sand),” who “had emeralds and rubies just dripping off ‘a him.” But, yes, I got all right. I went through

a year of physical therapy, and I started walking two weeks after returning home. Went to college, then law school, worked for three separate Federal Agencies, and have been in the private practice of law since 1993.

Here lately, I was reminded of a verse in the Beatles’ “*Tell Me What You See*,” beginning with the line “Big and black the clouds may be...” The verse was

taken from a religious inscription that had hung in John Lennon’s childhood home in Liverpool: “*However black the clouds may be, in time they’ll pass away. Have faith and trust and you will see, God’s light make bright your day.*” The same inscription was parodied by Lennon in his 1965 book, “*A Spaniard in the Works.*”

The Beatles always got things right.



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



Finding Margo

By Charlton Walters Hillis

W

hen Ginny lay dying, she called for her first cousin, Margo to come. I was there, I heard her, and it like to broke my heart that I couldn't be Margo for her.

Margo, whom she had refused to speak to for the last four years. The preacher came, and two ladies from the church were there, and her nearest neighbor with whom she had shared flood and famine over the years (myself), and of course, Pearlina was there, but that wouldn't do. It wouldn't do but for Harry to go start up the car, it balking in the freezing weather, and drive off to try to locate Margo. And she couldn't be found, at that. Ginny lay there in her bed under two or three layers of quilts and that new bedspread she was so proud of, and called out in pain, writhed in her pain, and called out for Margo. Why didn't Harry hurry back with her?

Through her bedroom window, you could see Morgan's Mountain, a thin, blue wall that was now almost hidden in the white of the snow, running north to south,

It wouldn't do but for Harry to go start up the car, it balking in the freezing weather, and drive off to try to locate Margo.



looking like a border Ginny herself might have put there to mark off the farm, as she would border a quilt or the yard with flowers. She had always liked to look out at that mountain in the mornings before she took sick, and even then as long as she had the strength to hold herself up. I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills.

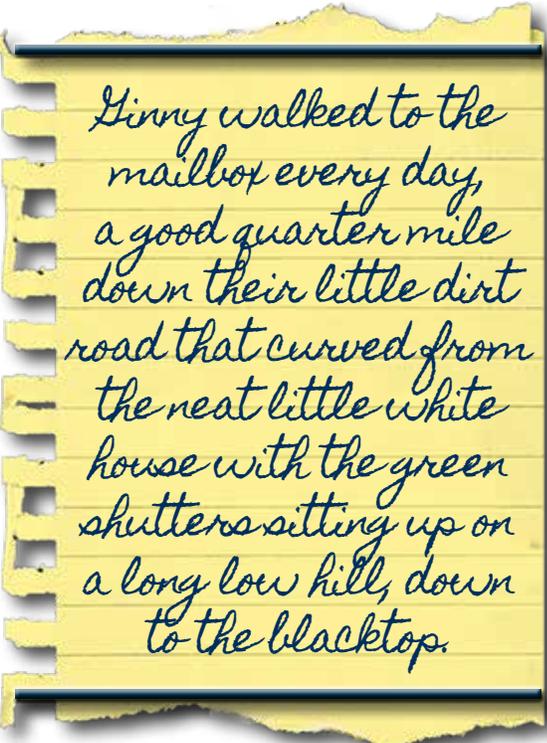
Pearline was staying nights now, and all day, too, to cook and clean and give Ginny her medicine and all. It was a good thing they had Pearl—everybody said that; otherwise she would be laid up in some cold hospital bed to wait out her days among strangers.

Harry had grown up a Mennonite but strayed when he was young and wanted to have a car so badly, and Pearl was one of his kin, never married, who had helped out beginning with the birth of the first baby. She herself was a moderate Mennonite, whatever you call them, I don't know, not the *black-bonnet-and long-black-dress* type, but the kind that wears a prayer cap all the time, a little white thing set on the back of her head like a doily.

Pearline could cook fit to beat all, because they, the Mennonites, were always baking, selling their breads and pastries and such straight out of their farm houses or at little open-air markets they set up along the road.

Pearline's specialty was macaroni and cheese, and Harry used to could eat a ton of it.

He told Pearl he always secretly wished that she could cook for them all the time, instead of just helping out now and then, but now that she was doing it full time, because of Ginny dying, he did not even feel like eating anymore.



Ginny walked to the mailbox every day, a good quarter mile down their little dirt road that curved from the neat little white house with the green shutters sitting up on a long low hill, down to the blacktop.

Ginny was sixty-four and Harry was sixty-six years old, and every day at noon since they were married, he had left the men he was working with in the field (most of them brought sack lunches and ate sitting around on the ground or on their tractors) and came all the way back to the house just to eat dinner with Ginny. She was still slender and pretty and

did not look her age—before she took sick, that is—and that was only one year before she died.

Ginny walked to the mailbox every day, a good quarter mile down their little dirt road that curved from the neat little white house with the green shutters sitting up on a long low hill, down to the blacktop. And, one day, Pearl had been on her way out—her brother, Olin driving her—when she saw Ginny down there at the mailbox. Ginny was as rosy and healthy-looking as could be and with a handful of wildflowers she had picked

along the way, putting them one by one into an arrangement in her hand as she walked, as carefully as if she were fixing up one for a show at the fair, and humming to herself, and right then, Pearline had a vision. She told me she had a vision of Ginny sick and dying, and the thought that Ginny lived her life like a poem. Now, that was Pearline for you, to say something like that about a poem. That wasn't but a year or two before they found Ginny had cancer, and Pearline didn't tell about that vision to anybody but me and Margo.

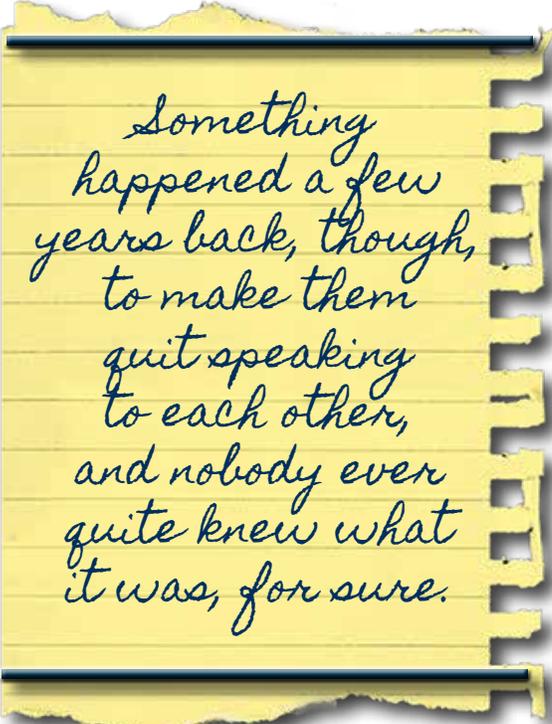
You need to understand that Ginny and Margo were extra close when they were girls. Always spending the night over at each other's place, always trading clothes back and forth, telling secrets, that sort of thing, just the best of friends.

Ginny was the type of girl who always had a dreamy look about her, like her mind was anywhere but where she was, head in the clouds, as they say, while Margo was always the type to have both feet on the ground. Strong and dependable. Still, in her own way, Ginney had her head in the clouds with that faith of hers. She was a solid rock sort who always seemed to see God as more real than the person next to her. She would say things that would shake me up sometimes, make my head swirl, like things were turned upside

down for just a minute, with religion on the ground and real life a little foggy. That's not to say Ginny was not a good girl, herself. They didn't come any better. Most folks who knew her loved her enough they would have done anything for her; that's just the effect she had on people. She and Margo each got married around the same time, eighteen years old for the both of them, and had their babies around the same time and both lived in the same county all their lives.

Something happened a few years back, though, to make them quit speaking to each other, and nobody ever quite knew what it was, for sure. Harry said it was awful to see the two of them who had been so chummy for so long to just split like

that, in cold silence. It wasn't human to act that way, he said, or civilized. Harry was real slow talking, with deep lines in his face, and always with a cigarette lit. He looked brown all over, face, arms, hands, tobacco stained. He'd wear an old ball cap, and he had just the kindest way about him. When he was young he looked exactly like Hank Williams and sang almost as well. But he and everybody else learned real fast not to talk to Ginny about the incident with Margo or try to patch things up between them. And Margo, for her part, wasn't much better, but Ginny was



Something happened a few years back, though, to make them quit speaking to each other, and nobody ever quite knew what it was, for sure.

always the stubborn one. Margo had made one attempt at a visit when Ginny first came down sick, but Ginny had got wind she was planning on coming and sent word she was not welcome. And now this.

One of the ladies tried to telephone Margo and then they tried again and again, and they called over to her mother's house and to her youngest daughter's, but nobody knew where she was. Her son lived off in another state, the same as both of Ginny's and Harry's children, who were on their way home right then, if the plane could get through in that weather. Harry thought maybe he could find her if he drove around just everywhere he could think of. It was icy and there was snow on the

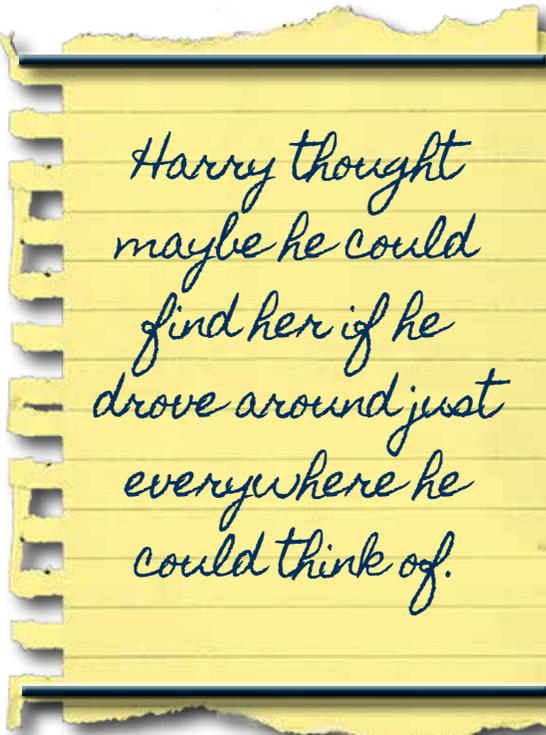
ground, and he had to put chains on the tires. So that made for real slow going. That made him itchy, because it did not seem right or fair to him—he told me later—that he should be out driving around all over creation, instead of sitting by his dying wife's bedside. But it was her last request, and she couldn't die peacefully without it being done. He got the idea later that he could have asked the sheriff or someone to help find her for him, but that was one of those things you think about too late. Harry figured maybe he could find Margo helping out with the Millers' baby

that was due any day now and might have to be born at home, considering the road conditions to Harrisburg. He thought the same about her being at a number of other places. Her husband John Lee, a truck driver, was out of town as usual and no help at all, never was.

Harry had turned right there by that Mennonite sign that advertises wagons and buggies built and repaired, and went down that little road to the Millers' house, and she wasn't there, and he could hear Junie Miller screaming in the back room. The doctor, it was Dr. Owens—he looks just like a boy, it's hard to believe he's a doctor but he's a good one—was just coming in and asked

Harry about Ginny, and Harry told him all about it, and the doctor said he'd be on over there in a bit, just as soon as he got that latest little Miller delivered into the world.

Harry drove on off, and the sky was dark and closing in with more snow clouds, the valley a long white strip below it, with a mountain range running right along on each side the way they do. It made you feel if you went over the mountains, on either side you chose, the weather might be entirely different for all you could tell—it might be bright and sunny over there when it's dreary here, or

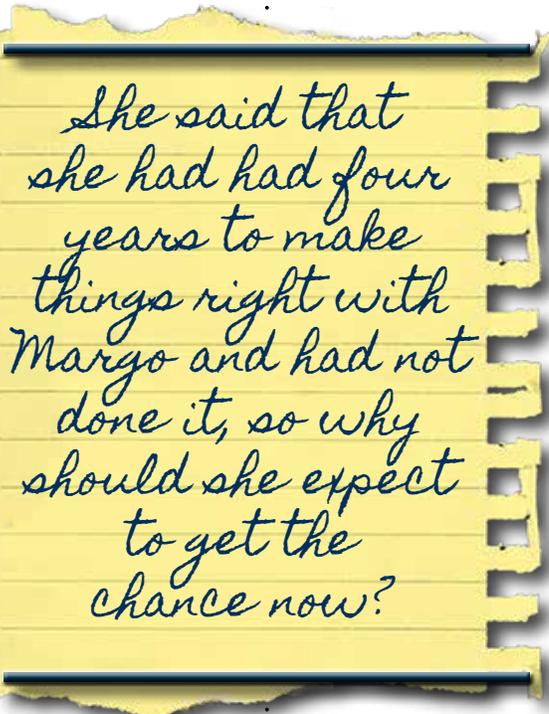


the other way around. It's God's country, this valley with its fertile farms. There's lots of green in warm weather, on all these low rolling hills and farms with white houses, red barns, silos, cattle and apple orchards. Driving down a narrow blacktop road that goes up and down the little hills (and nice and easy around the swooping curves), now and then, there's one of those black Mennonite buggies. They'll typically have a red-orange safety sticker on the rear and be drawn by a fine horse clip-clopping along, with a lady inside with her black bonnet and black dress and her man in a black hat and maybe a bright-eyed little child peeping out, wearing a little hat or bonnet. It's as if they came riding straight out of a hundred years ago. And there was always those blue mountains; they were graceful-looking mountains that have been around long enough—like some very old people—to have grown wise and gentle and able to hold their tongue.

Well, as I was saying, Harry drove around with those chains on his tires bumping, thud, thud, thud, the way they do, going slow when he wanted to go fast, and still hunting for Margo at this house and that (as he thought of them), racking his brain to think where to look next. And, he even went into the grocery store and into the drug store to ask, but no

one had seen her.

Harry had started off around ten in the morning, when Ginny had been asking for Margo, and they had not been able to get her on the phone. He was gone about two hours, and when he came back without her, Ginny did not blame him, as he had dreaded she might in her pain and all, but she blamed her-



She said that she had had four years to make things right with Margo and had not done it, so why should she expect to get the chance now?

self. He had rather then that she blamed him. She said that she had had four years to make things right with Margo and had not done it, so why should she expect to get the chance now? It liked to tore the heart out of Harry and the rest of us. And then she couldn't talk anymore, just kind of faded away for a while.

Harry said when she died, it was like watching a snowflake melt right there on the pillow. Dr. Owens came then, in his jeep. He's the only one in the whole country, I guess, who still makes house calls—a young doctor at that—but everybody knew that it was just a formality, that nothing could be done for her. She passed away at three o'clock in the afternoon.

And who would have thought of Margo being out in the cemetery at her father's grave in that kind of weather? She said that she had just had him on her mind so strong she couldn't sleep the night before and she had to go over there and visit him, with chains on

her tires and wrapped up like an Eskimo. And after she left there, she had ended up drinking hot chocolate and having a long talk in the kitchen of a friend whom Harry had not thought of, because he did not even know her, she having not lived around here but four months. Margo met her through the garden club. Of course, Harry and Margo had a good cry apiece on each other's shoulders over that one point of Ginny not getting her last wish. Something like that will tear a body apart more than death itself.

Anyhow, it was just about a week after the funeral that Margo went to talk with Pearlline, because, by now of course, Pearlline had told about her vision, the one she saw when she met Ginny by the mailbox that day, so Margo thought Pearlline might understand and not think she was crazy. They were sitting at the kitchen table in Pearlline's mother's house, and Pearlline had just baked extra banana bread so she could take some over to Harry. So, the two of them were eating slices of that, with fresh butter melted on it. Margo told Pearlline that the phone had rung in the night, and when she had answered, it was Ginny's voice, no doubt about that. The only thing was that it was like when a long distance call has

got a bad connection with the line crackling, static and all, so that you can't understand what is being said.

Margo had said, real loud like, "I can't hear you," meaning she couldn't hear well enough to understand what was being said, but she was sure who it was, mind you. And

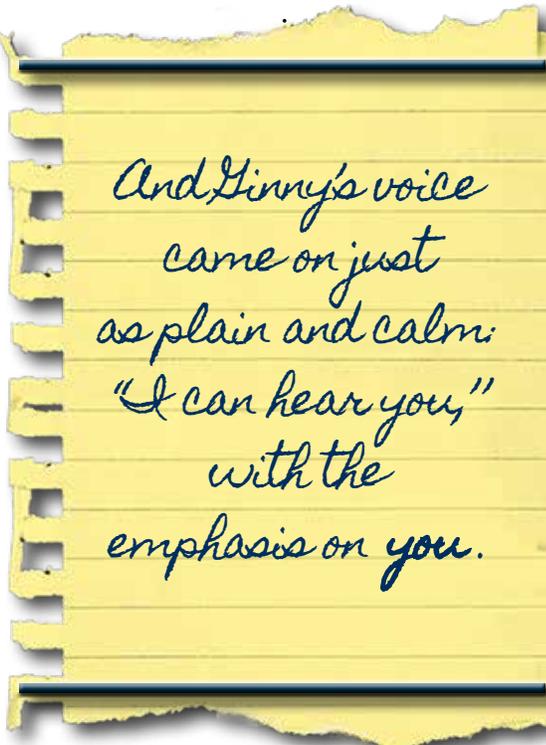
Ginny's voice came on just as plain and calm: "I can hear you," with the emphasis on **you**, kind of like it was Margo's fault she couldn't hear well. And then the bad connection got worse, and that was it. That was all.

Pearline did not doubt for a minute that it was Ginny trying to call from beyond the grave. Margo withheld her judgment as

to what had happened, as was Margo's way, not saying if she thought it was just a dream in the night or not, but she seemed more at peace after that, as if she felt she and Ginny kind of had a last talk after all and wrapped everything up.



Charlton Walters Hillis has a fine arts degree, but her first love is creative writing, primarily the short story.



And Ginny's voice came on just as plain and calm: "I can hear you," with the emphasis on you.

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Blood on the Ground

By Merle Temple



Otis saw the advancing lights through the cracks in the boards. Lights moving down the slope—one, two, three or more, waving back and forth as men or Martians walked toward the outhouse.

“Them Martians got dogs with them, too,” he thought as he raised the heavy iron slab in front of him as a shield. The lights stopped and held steady for what seemed like forever. He could see the outlines of the men in the darkest corners of the shadows.

“That you in there on your throne, you old bootlegger?” a shrill voice shouted.

“Is that you out there, you piles of sticks and stones, or are you a bunch of Martians come to zap me?” Otis answered as he released the safety on the Browning.

“No, you old fool, it’s Sammy and Marty Stone, come to set things right,” Sammy Stone said.

“Well, David needed three smooth stones to slay Goliath. You are about two shy to slay me, aren’t you? Those stones don’t roll no more, do they?” Otis answered.

“You have to answer for our brothers, Terry and Tim. We come to kill you, old man,” Stone said.

“They had to atone for my wife, Sheeler, and you can pay, too, if you’ve a mind to. Besides, they made the prettiest corpses you ever did see propped up against that tree! Who found them first, the hogs or the buzzards?” Otis said, taunting them.

“Your woman was a big ole piñata that begged to be beaten,” Sammy Stone countered.

“Taunt me all you want, sonny boy. This is not my first rodeo. Is this really the hill you children want to die on, or you just come here with your heads full of mescaline to sniff round and hike your legs like the mongrels you are?” Otis shouted.

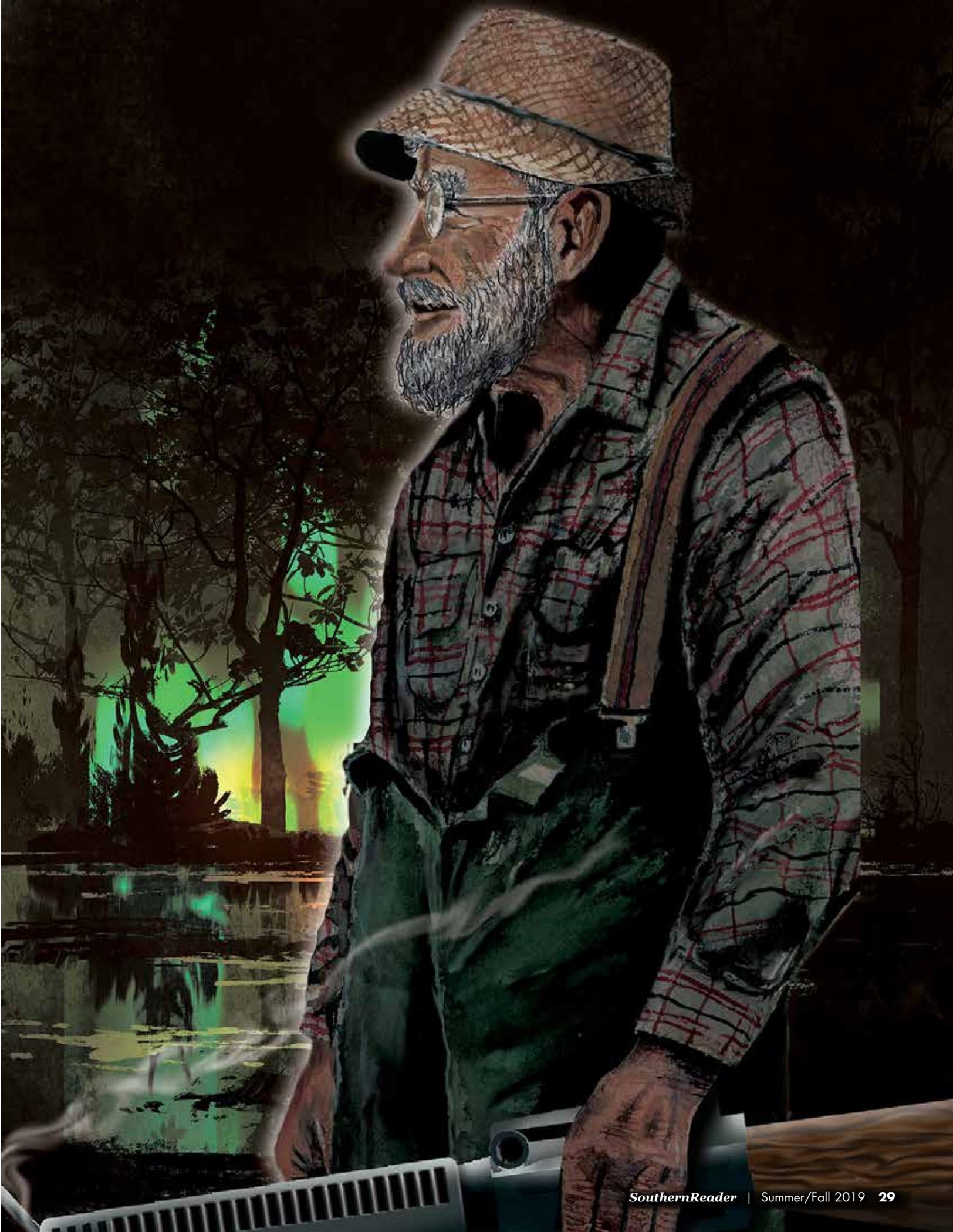
“You’re the one who’s gonna die tonight, old man,” Stone said.

“Well, you gonna get on with it or just talk me to death?” Otis shot back.

“You go to blazes, old man,” Stone answered.

“Been there, boys. The devil sent me back. He couldn’t handle

“Taunt me all you want, sonny boy. This is not my first rodeo. Is this really the hill you children want to die on?”



me, and you and your army can't either," Otis said.

Otis heard the cursing, the baying of the hounds, and he could sense their hesitation and fear. He peered through the cracks at the outlines of the men who had come to kill him. They'd sloshed through the swamp to the west of him and were wearing wading boots, hip-huggers that only left a little white v-outline up front.

Otis studied them for a moment as they hesitated and argued. He said, "You boys sure are pretty. You always wear diapers or just when you come after me?" he asked with a chuckle. "Well, no matter. It's still an improvement over the sheets you wear when you're out burning crosses," he added.

A voice in the dark whined, "Sammy, you gonna let him talk to us that way?"

"Come and get it then, you little green men! Your brothers are waiting with the devil for you!" Otis shouted to egg them on.

He began to sing Tommy Roe's song "Sweet Little Sheila," but, remembering his wife, added an "r" so that it sounded more like "Sweet Little Sheeler..."

He could hear the Stone boys and others running toward the outhouse as the first pink hues of morning showed. The click-click, shick-shick cocking and arming of their automatic weapons filled the night air, and their epithets punctuated the false bravado of men who had come to kill or be killed.

He raised the BAR, pulled it firmly against

his shoulder, and clicked A for automatic, just as the whining bullets from the guns of the Stone brothers riddled the walls of the outhouse and pinged and plinked against his metal shield.

Splinters filled the air, and Otis brushed the residue from his eyes. He laughed out loud and thought his prison chaplain would be so happy to know he finally got the plank out of his eye. Then the night exploded in light and fire from the chug-chug-chug of his Browning. The rounds blew the door off its hinges. The recoil of the weapon kicked like a mule and increased with each round fired. He emptied one magazine, slapped in a new one, and started again.

Moans and screams filled the night air, dogs yelped, ejected shells bounced off the walls, and somewhere in the dark, someone was crying for their mama.

"I'm hit! Oh Mama, help me, Mama!" someone moaned.

The din of the battle was deafening, and the smell of gunpowder poisoned his senses. He became one with his weapon and thought the barrel of the gun was so hot it would melt down. Blood ran down his brow into his eyes, and there was a deep burning in his left side.

Am I hit?

He couldn't tell. He was running on anger and revenge. The smell of sulfur and charcoal filled the night air. An outline of a pentagram appeared on the blood-soaked hillside. The thief of the night, the roaring lion, was already sweeping the hillside in the tease of

In that moment of horror, everything slowed to a crawl. Misery was magnified, and each molecule of air floating by him was a grain of sand seeping from the hourglass of life.

dayglow, collecting souls and announcing to Jesus, “None here for your heaven, only kindling for my fire.”

This was a dead end on the road of broken dreams. In that moment of horror, everything slowed to a crawl. Misery was magnified, and each molecule of air floating by him was a grain of sand seeping from the hourglass of life.

He thought he caught a glimpse of Sheeler, young, beautiful, and without stain. Amid the carnage, a bright light appeared, a tunnel opened, and a man emerged from the light with his arms outstretched.

Otis thought heaven must be a ghost town tonight, and then he thought of his Doberman named Jesus. Thieves who came to steal his homebrew and raid his stills used to hear his growl in the dark and run away crying, “Jesus is coming! Jesus is coming!”

He thought that old agent, Michael Parker was missing a great party, and the last thing he remembered before he passed out was that smell again...formaldehyde.



*This is an excerpt from “**Blood on the Ground: Living and Dying in Nod**,” the newest book from **Merle Temple**, a former deputy sheriff, agent with the Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics (in the first “War on Drugs”), corporate security manager, and campaign manager who warred with what he calls the unholy trilogy of politics, crime, and business. He has written five books in the **Michael Parker** series. The novels are written as fiction but drawn from his life. His signature book, “**A Ghostly Shade of Pale**,” is based on his experiences in the **Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics**, where he was held hostage by heroin dealers, targeted by organized crime for assassination, and ambushed with his team by a sniper in a violent gun battle.*

BLOOD ON THE GROUND

LIVING AND DYING IN NOD



A MICHAEL PARKER NOVEL BY
MERLE TEMPLE

Drugs, bombings, murder, kidnapping, Communists, Satanists, corrupt politicians, and lost lambs. What it was like on the front lines of the second rebellion of humankind. How it changed America. Why it matters. This is the story of Michael Parker, a naive undercover agent and his descent into darkness in Mississippi in 1972.

The Guacamole Tower

By Marshall Lancaster

No one knew why such an imposing monument as our tower dotted the countryside of my hometown, Aurelian Springs, North Carolina, or how long it had been there.

One of the most ubiquitous beacons of country life in a small southern town is the water tower—guacamole green, faded yet proud, ominous, and fifty-feet high.

No one knew why such an imposing monument as our tower dotted the countryside of my hometown, Aurelian Springs, North Carolina, or how long it had been there. It stood frozen beside our elementary school's softball field in the late 70's, before the school was renovated. We never saw a farmer, maintenance employee, or parent attempt to grapple with this tower in any meaningful way. Its mystique loomed large throughout elementary school, as we all wondered if said tower had a real purpose in our culture. Was it a reservoir of ready water in the event of fire?

The tower's conspicuous place near the softball field caused much consternation among the locals, but no parent ever really came out and said, "Stay away from the water tower!" It spoke for itself in its proportion to the size of the average young person who was brave enough to walk up to it. It had four gigantic cement pyramidal feet at its base. In many regards, the tower cut a dashing figure as an alien spacecraft. Any attempt to see it as lesser than it was was surely an exercise in stupidity and futility. Its four gruesome and gargantuan feet alone made the tower something to be avoided at all costs. The occasional foul ball might send you in vicinity of the tower, but you never wanted to stay in its midst very long—you got the ball and then stealthily ran away. You went straight back to the game or the practice—no time lost. One June day in 1979 this all changed.

We had been hosting a county-wide church league softball tournament featuring teams from Halifax, Weldon, and



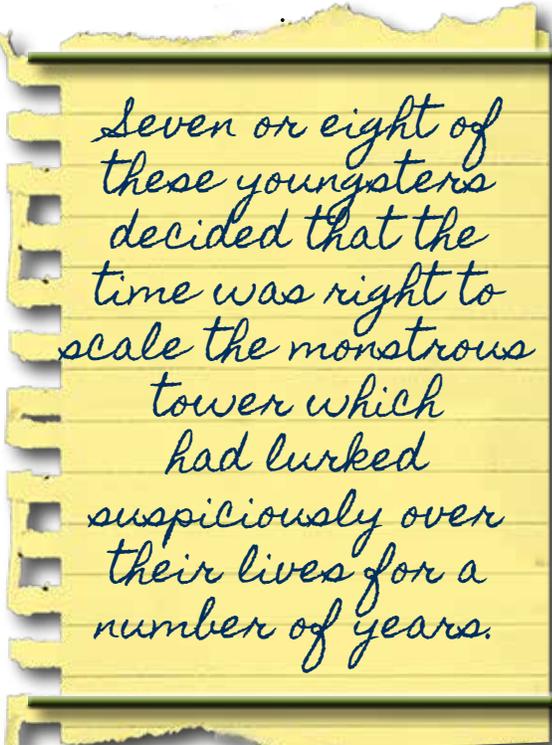
Roanoke Rapids. Everyone affiliated with the team was completely vested in the tourney. Kids proudly donned uniforms, and parents either operated the concession stand with large smiles or shouted high praise for their sons so as to be heard over everything else. It had been a hot afternoon of great games, and our team had muscled its way out of the losers' bracket and into the finals, where we had to beat an experienced Halifax team twice to claim the championship. We had won the first game against Halifax, and we were one win from claiming the championship. Our coach was very confident going into the game.

However, not all of the youngsters present at these games were actual players. Brothers, sisters, and cousins of the players, these kids were dragged away from cartoons, action figures, and other joyous Saturday pursuits, to attend games which, sadly, did not interest them in the least, in the hot unrelenting sun. They were not particularly well-versed in the rules of the game and, in the throes of activity on the field, no player or parent was about to explain these so-called rules to them. Much could be taught and learned if only the adults were up to the challenge.

Hindsight suggests that some explanation of the rules of this game, played on a diamond with three bases and a home plate, might have averted a would-be disaster.

This posse of disconnected youth, the untu-

tored masses ranging from ages 6-10, had found a way to combat the ennui and life-draining sunlight they had been forced to endure as spectators of a game they didn't quite grasp anyway. Seven or eight of these youngsters decided that the time was right to scale the monstrous tower which had lurked suspiciously over their lives for a number



Seven or eight of these youngsters decided that the time was right to scale the monstrous tower which had lurked suspiciously over their lives for a number of years.

of years. They would show the tower, and anyone else, who was boss. Unfortunately, there was no conventional ladder allowing safe passage to the top. This factor only slowed them down a little as the kids just used the angled beams to scoot their way to each level. At the top of each beam, there was a pedestal allowing one to stand, albeit precariously. Many of the kids had taken this maneuver as a chance to

prove how limber they were as they aimed for the top. It was an unspoken competition. Who could slink his way to the top in the shortest amount of time? Who could do it most gracefully? If they pressed on, they might even be able to answer a question that was over a decade old: Is there really useful water in the water tower? They soldiered onward as if on a mission.

Parents finally came to a collective epiphany as it dawned on them that the kids were nowhere to be found. Where were these kids? No one knew. They could be buying sodas, using the restroom, or off somewhere playing hide and seek. It was impossible to watch kids and the game at the same time. As if the

panic of not knowing where the kids were was not enough, shouts billowed from atop the tower: “Look at us,” “Here we are,” and “You can’t catch us now.” Adults raised their hands to their foreheads, blocking out the sun, only to discover the answer to the question of the day. It finally became obvious that their kids were at the top of this eyesore of a tower. The parents abruptly went into panic mode, and as a result, so did the kids. It was one thing to climb up this tower with the boys, the people with whom you share a common goal, but quite another to do a return trip to the ground with the same expertise. How would things work now that the new journey—the way down—was their next shared goal? All parents’ eyes were fixated on the descent. The boys, petrified now, felt like they were performing, like they still might have something to prove. Do you attack this task with grace and elegance, or do you just do whatever gets you to the bottom? The only problem was that this time, lives were at stake. If parents had been allowed to question this move, they would have done so by simply asking the most important question of all: “And what if you fall?” This was a task requiring surgeon-like concentration. Nearly a dozen parents looked up at their kids, not sure if words of encouragement (“*You can do it! Hold on tight!*”) or complete silence were the appropriate response. A fall to the ground would be quite a thud. What possessed them to climb the tower? The difference between

What possessed them to climb the tower? The difference between innocence and experience could be one weak grip of the beams.

innocence and experience could be one weak grip of the beams.

As the parents coached them from the ground, one by one, they came carefully down without the slightest slip. They knew that any semblance of error might exacerbate an already-horrible scenario. When our young thrill-seekers had made it to the bottom, no worse for the wear, many an adult tongue-lashing was dealt out, and each one reverberated underneath that tower for minutes to come. Many a rhetorical question was asked: “And you think I’m bringing you to another softball game?” and “Have you gone crazy?” Parents ordered all of their young ones—softball players and tower climbers—to get in the car right now, no maybes or what-ifs.

The collective expression on each parent’s face seemed to say, “Between the sun and the excitement we have had just about enough.” Parents apologized to their young athletes, who were still in the field listening to the parents. Many players were upset, decrying unfairness and issuing threats to siblings. One player talked about the home-run he would have hit. A pitcher bragged that no one could hit his knuckle ball anyhow. I don’t honestly think that we could have beaten Halifax a second time, so being a co-winner suddenly was a good thing—it surely beat runner-up. Our fun was cut short, but each kid who got in a car that afternoon learned a powerful lesson—do not challenge a parent when the life of a kid is at stake. The parents

had clearly had enough, and maybe this was a way to teach a lesson to whomever might be watching, to send a message. Who was really to blame? You knew someone was—you could feel the gravity of the moment. Regardless of who you were, if you were on or near that field, you shouldered some of that blame. Ears rang for several minutes. What could you have done but did not do?

In the 1980's, which were to follow, softball gained an enormous following as a spectator sport in Aurelian Springs, North Carolina. Many teenagers were offered scholarships to play baseball in college. People would come from places outside a thirty-mile radius to watch or play in these games. Fans kept records, feverishly, on the bench and in the stands. This had to be the major leagues of small town life. People of all ages rooted for players, for mascots, most frequently calling them by name ("Go Cougars!" and "Way to hit that ball, David. Take three."). That rebellious minority of young people had finally bought into this concept we hear about in the modern day: *the love of the game*. Parents took them to K-Mart, where they purchased gloves, bats, and cleats. They started asking questions: *Can a baserunner advance if a ball is caught in the outfield and there is one out?*, *What's the infield fly rule?*, and *Does it apply to softball?* What exactly is an RBI? Row after row of lawn chairs dotted the space around the field. A kid never left a seat

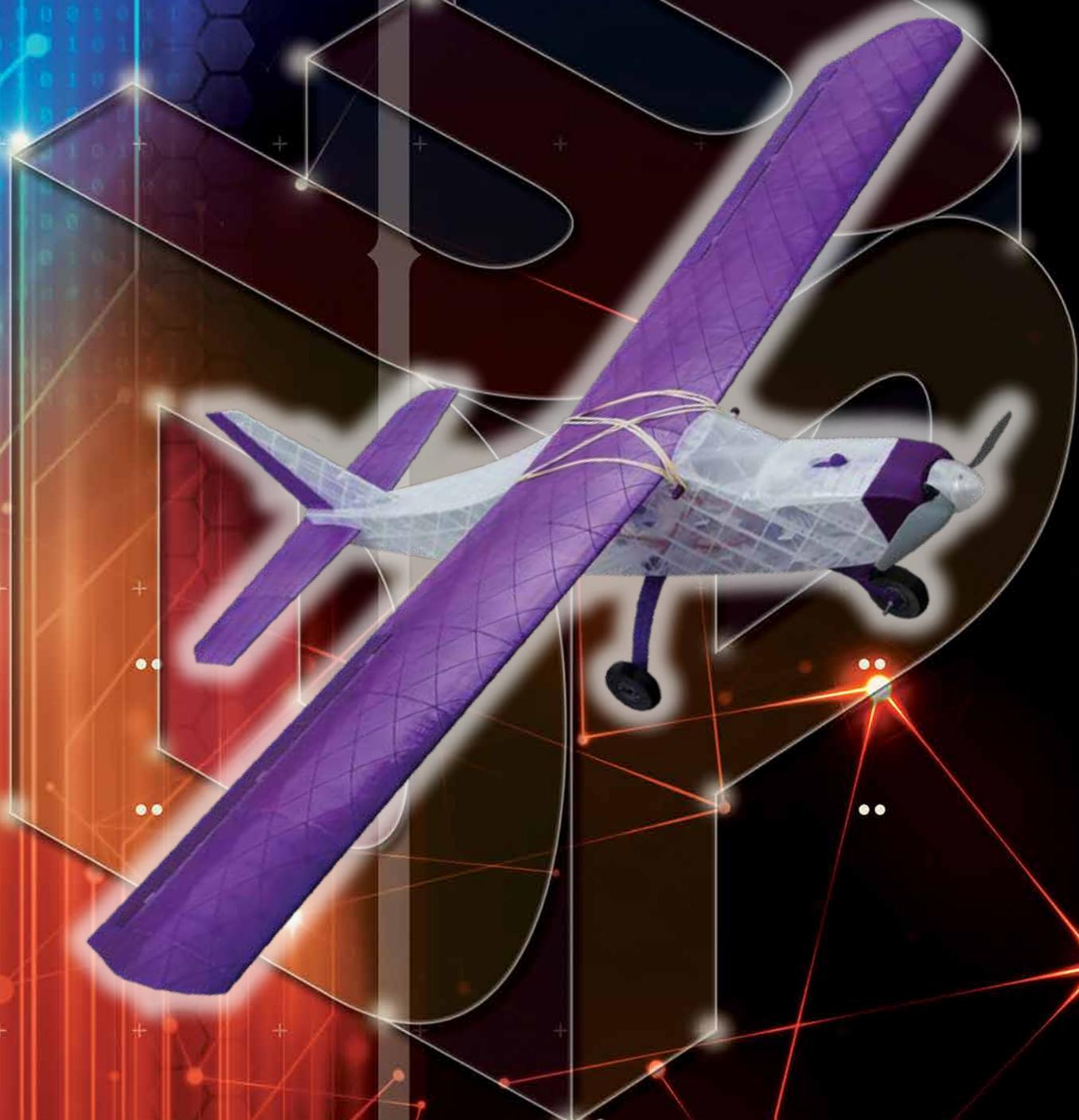
The green water tower stood erectly and innocently by the field. To a degree it had been defeated without really knowing it was even in a skirmish.

except to buy a hot dog or soda. The green water tower had never been quite so lonely. Our tower-climbing youngsters had turned over a new leaf. They played on the team the following year, all of them except for one, who helped his mother run the concession stand peddling burgers, hot dogs, sodas, and Certs. When coaches gave you game advice, you took it. If a coach's idea didn't pan out, you never stubbornly said, "I had a feeling that was not going to work out." People followed the game. The green water tower stood erectly and innocently by the field. To a degree it had been defeated without really knowing it was ever in a skirmish. Had parents' reactions caused these new ripple effects? We may never know. Was this culture change amplified via the parents' strong reverberating message? When I remember those great games, I always see pale green, as I visualize what lies just west of third base and left field in a small grove of trees. Our lives may have been changed forever, but it was much later in life that I came to this realization.



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The Wild, Wild Woman from Borneo

By David Ray Skinner

I

met Ramona in the second grade. She was the girl next door. She hadn't always lived next door; old man Schlotz used to live in the little frame house there on the property. The only thing my little brother and I ever heard him say was, "Hey you kids, what do you think you're doing?"

Sometimes it was because we had ventured into his yard to retrieve an errant baseball or glider; other times we would be in our own backyard, playing army or just digging in the dirt with our tanks and dumptrucks, and we'd hear him scream, "Alright, you kids, I'm warning you!" My dad told us to steer clear of him. "He's a little eccentric," I overheard him tell my mother.

"What's eccentric mean?" my little brother asked me later.

"I think it means loud and angry," I told him.

However, one day toward the beginning of the autumn of my second-grade year, I realized that we had succeeded in rescuing an overthrown football only a few yards from his back porch without the old man's vocal alarm going off; it was all quiet on the Western Front. Not long after that, I awoke one Saturday morning to the growl of a huge moving van backing into Old Man Schlotz's driveway. When I got down to the no-man's-land ditch that separated our properties, I first saw Ramona. She was loudly chewing bubble gum and wearing denim overalls. She had braided pigtails and intense, purple-neon eyes, and she watched my approach with an unemotional interest.

"Mr. Schlotz doesn't like anyone on his property," I said, hands on my hips, trying to seize control of the situation, "Especially big ol' trucks," I added, gesturing toward the moving van.

"Mr. Schlotz has moved away. Far, far away," she said solemnly, pointing upward with her thumb, "This is our house now." Before I could protest, she looked at me and smiled knowingly. I think I will never forget that smile. In the gray matter filing cabinet that is my memory, it is safely locked away and labeled, "*Ramona: First Smile.*" The reason I tend to dwell on it is that it was so *typical* of what I would come to realize over the years as being the pure essence of her—it was so *Ramona-esque*, if you will. It was her

"Mr. Schlotz has moved away. Far, far away," she solemnly said, pointing upward with her thumb, "This is our house now."



THE W

BORNEO





major weapon of choice, and I often observed her as she overpowered countless others by her prudent and discerning use of it. It certainly disarmed me that Saturday morning. Thinking back on it now, I feel fortunate that she considered me worthy enough to share it with me—or at least, *use it on me*—at our introduction.

The following Monday, I was pleasantly surprised when my second-grade teacher, Mrs. Clancy, introduced her to our class. “Boys and girls,” Mrs. Clancy said, “This is Ramona. She is our newest student. She and her family have moved here from another state. Please make her welcome.”

At this point in this sort of circumstance, one of the boys would usually snicker and say, “Another dumb girl. Big deal.”

Or, one of the girls would say, “I don’t like her dress, do you?”

But Ramona smiled at Mrs. Clancy and then at the class, and any rude remark was rendered dead or obsolete before it could be formed in their mouths.

After school that afternoon, in what would become a daily ritual, Ramona and I walked home together. The following Friday, as we hurried home to begin the weekend, she casually asked if I had ever been to the circus. Before I could answer, she said, “It’s simply the best thing in the world. I especially love the Wild Woman from Borneo. She’s so mysterious and beautiful, but mostly mysterious. I bet she knows everything about everything.”

“Uh...” I stammered, not really knowing how to reply to such a profound and definitive declaration, “*The wild what from where?*”

“Wait a minute,” she said, intentionally ignoring my ignorance and suddenly stopping, “*I’ve got a splendid idea! Let’s fix our backyard up*

and put on a circus! Do you have any money in your pockets? I just happen to have a five-dollar bill that my Aunt Button gave me. Let’s go and see what we can unearth at the five-and-dime!”

Rupert’s *Five-and-Dime* was on the end of the block of where our little town’s downtown area began. It was about a quarter of a mile out of the way on our walk home, but with the weekend coming up, a big plan in the works, and Aunt Button’s fiver burning a hole in Ramona’s change purse, it was not so much of an inconvenience as it was a grand opportunity.

Rupert was stirring the peanuts in the candy bin when we creaked down the rich brown wooden floors to the back of the store to where the costume jewelry, feathers, rubber masks and miscellaneous and *off-the-beaten-path* toys and products were almost apologetically displayed. The store always smelled like a combination of chocolate, plastic, dust and fabric. That afternoon, there was an air of anxious joy that was thrown into the mix of smells for good measure and for good reason—we were going to build a circus.

We bought costumes, feathers, large sheets of posterboard and whatever other supplies we could think of to set wings to our weekend dream. Back then, five dollars went a long way, and we had to borrow a shopping cart from Mr. Hatmaker, who ran the grocery store next door to Rupert’s, just to transport all of the treasures. Mr. Hatmaker was one of my father’s lodge brothers, and he knew he’d get the cart back. We’d also spent our last pennies (from my pocket change) on some Co-Colas from Mr. Hatmaker’s big cooler at the front of the store.

It took us most of that Saturday to put the show together and to make the posters to advertise our backyard circus. When my mother

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called me in for dinner, we both realized that the big event would have to wait until after church the following day, but the anticipation made it all that much more exciting. It also gave us the opportunity to invite some of our church friends to the event.

And what an event it turned out to be. Most of the kids on our street showed up, along with three or four from my Sunday School class. Some of them brought their parents and their younger brothers and sisters. My mom made popcorn, which she insisted on distributing free (over my protests that it could be a big money-maker).

I was the ringmaster, and my little brother was a clown. We had given him specific instructions for him to not try to be funny. He was to be a silent clown; if he wanted to express himself, he would need to honk my bicycle horn (which I had duct-taped to his clown belt). Still, he couldn't help himself. "Knock knock," he kept asking the crowd. Some of the older kids in the neighborhood called him "*Knock-Knock the Clown*" for years after that.

We dressed our dogs, Bippy, Albert, Ralph, and Mr. Jingles, in makeshift lion and tiger costumes and had them jump through hula hoops decorated with paper flames. And we even worked Mr. Hatmaker's grocery cart into the act. We coerced the lion-dogs and tiger-dogs into the cart with pieces of Velveeta, and my brother, the clown, pushed them through the cheering crowd as he honked his horn. "That's my dad's cart," Bernard Hatmaker said proudly, as my brother honked his way up to the stage and behind the curtain.

But the star attraction, of course, was Ramona. We had borrowed the checkered curtains from our den and hung them over a rope strung across the staging area of our backyard. When we pulled back the curtains, she emerged in all her grandeur and mystery. She wore large hoop earrings and had wrapped her head in a purple silk turban. Wild strands of hair from her aunt's black wig sprouted from underneath the turban, and her glued-on fingernails curled under her little hands like those of a tree sloth. Ramona's outfit was equally as exotic; she wore

an elegant silk top with bright moons and stars and a thick, purple velvet skirt. She clasped a Japanese folding fan in one hand and a vinyl 45-RPM record in the other. The most unusual touch, however, was the strange monkey tail peeking out from the purple velvet.

For that matter, maybe it was the monkey tail that caused the uproar, but for whatever reason, Tombo Tucker's baby brother shrieked in horror at the sight of Ramona gliding across the makeshift stage. This, in turn, set off the other babies like a tiny, backyard chain-reaction atom bomb.

Ramona, however, was seemingly oblivious to the hubbub. She casually dropped the record onto my spinning antique turntable and turned the volume knob until it could turn no more. As the strains of "*Night Winds of Borneo*" filled the backyard, she moved hypnotically to the eerie music in a ghostly trance, and a strange, quiet calm fell over our backyard. Even the Tucker baby stared quietly at Ramona, his head swaying back and forth in sync with hers like a big-eared, one-tooth cobra. As the music rose in a dynamic crescendo, Ramona held her arms out and waved them at the audience in a smooth rotation, as if she were polishing the windshield on our '56 Impala.

Then, as the music slowed to a graceful ending, the performance ended as smoothly, and yet, as unexpectedly as it had begun, leaving Ramona in the center of the stage, smiling as she exited. The backyard broke out in waves of startled applause, and my mother waded into the audience to hand out paper bags filled with her popcorn. It was an event that would be long remembered as "that backyard circus day," with





Ramona as the focal point of the memory. And, though we would conduct a backyard circus every summer after that initial one (sometimes we'd even have two or three in a single season), that first performance is the one that everyone from the old neighborhood tended to remember at our various reunions over the years. However, not everyone was pleased with the performance, and the fallout from that first circus—both

good and bad—was immediate and intense. Several mothers on our block forbade their children to play with Ramona, calling her “that circus child.” Some mothers even kept their children away from my brother and me, as if Ramona’s *Wild Woman* ways had somehow rubbed off on us. We were, after all, her next-door neighbors and circus co-performers. We also owned and took care of the circus “lions and tigers” on a daily basis. At our elementary school the following Monday, some of the older kids on the bus began making chimp noises when Ramona and I got on at our regular bus stop. “There’s the *Monkey Girl*,” Rusty Phlamm, the red-headed hellion from two streets over, yelled from the back of the bus. It was obvious that he had been anxiously practicing his verbal ambush.

“Oh thank you,” Ramona gushed, “It was nothing, really!”

Obviously, that wasn’t the response Rusty had expected, so red-faced, he sprang up from his bus benchseat and scratched his armpits with both arms like a gorilla. “Eep, eep, eep, *Monkey Girl!*” he said.

“Gracious, *Mr. Red Rooster*,” Ramona said, smiling broadly, “We’ll just have to find you a part in our next circus!”

Rusty sputtered and his face turned as red as

his hair as everyone’s laughter was immediately directed at him. It also instantly earned him the nickname of *Rooster*, a moniker that he initially strongly (and often violently) resented, but one he came to embrace in his later high-school days. In fact, it stayed with him after his thinning hair faded from red into gray and was even on his obituary after he accidentally drove his mini-bike over the cliff into Bip’s Quarry one night after a wild retirement party.

I was always amazed at how Ramona habitually took everything in stride, whether it was a compliment or an insult. She had the incredible ability to wrestle the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune away from her would-be attackers and seamlessly convert them into implementations of courteous hospitality. Her intelligence and outgoing personality served her well during our formative years. We became best friends and confidants, although I always felt like I was one

step behind her. I loved her strange and quirky ways, and in junior high we grew quite close. I suppose you could say we dated, but most of our so-called dates were strange and adventuresome outings that always bordered on circusdom, if not *the bizarre*.

Going into our sophomore year, I got up the nerve to ask her to wear my ring. “Of course, silly,” she said, “Just as long as I don’t have to wear it on my hand all the time!”

We both laughed at that, but true to form, the following day she showed up at the busstop with my ring glistening in her left nostril. Even Rusty Phlamm was taken aback. “M-M-Monkey Girl?” he stammered.

“Oh,” she said, “Thank-you, R-R-Rooster!”

One afternoon during our senior year, over milkshakes at the Rexley drugstore soda foun-

Not everyone was pleased with the performance, and the fallout from that first circus—both good and bad—was immediate and intense.





However, the end result was always the same. I left every midway without finding Ramona.

The days turned to weeks and the weeks into months, and September was coming on. I had already made plans to go away to college, or, I should say, Ramona and I had made plans to attend a pleasant little college a couple of hours away from our hometown. As I sadly accepted defeat and decided to

go home to prepare for the fall, I caught a ride north in Georgia with a couple of frat cats who were headed to Illinois. Just outside a little town in Middle Tennessee, I saw a billboard advertising a county fair. My initial reaction was to just pass it up—at that point, I had had quite enough of carnival surfing—but on this particular billboard, someone had crudely added an amateurishly-painted footnote: “Starring the Wild, Wild Woman from Borneo.”

I almost leapt from the car, but struggled to gain my composure. “Fellows,” I said, “As much as I’ve enjoyed the ride and conversation, I just realized that I know someone in this town, so could you drop me off?”

“Sure,” the driver said, winking at me in the rear view mirror, “We’ll even drop you at her house!”

“It’s a big house,” I said, “Say, do you guys like snakes?”

That’s how I found Ramona. She was in a sideshow at the carnival. This particular carnival wasn’t creepy, but it also wasn’t exactly neat and tidy. I arrived just in time for one of her performances, and in the dim carnival light, I didn’t immediately recognize her. But then, she spotted me in the crowd and smiled that old familiar Ramona grin; there she was, reveling in all her makeup, fur, feathers and *Borneo-ness*.

“I love you,” I mouthed, tears in my eyes.

And then she looked straight at me and said something like, “*Gwahz-a-mooka-la!!! Chee! Chee!*”

She must have seen the shock and hurt in my eyes, because she repeated it. “*Gwahz-a-mooka-la!!! Chee! Chee!*” she screamed, and then she looked to the sky (or in this case, to the top of the tent) and shrieked it again for effect.

After her show, I tried to get backstage (actually, “backtent” would have been more appropriate... the stage was a flat-bed trailer), but I was strong-armed by one of the carnival goons. “She doesn’t want to see you,” he said gruffly, “She said to tell you it was a career choice, and she’s very happy. She said to tell you to go home. Go to college. Go crazy, but just go.”

“Career?” I said, incredulously. “That’s not a career, it’s a sideshow!”

“Look kid,” the goon said, “We have several

choices here. We could call the cops, which is one of our least favorite options in the world, and one that we most likely will not exercise; we can handle this ourselves, which is what we are leaning toward at this moment, and I can personally guarantee that you will not enjoy it; or you can be a good little boy and run along home. It’s your choice, sonny-boy.”

At that moment, I sadly realized that it was all over between Ramona and me, and knowing her as I did, getting myself arrested or beat up would not win her back. I could just hear her saying, “Don’t expect me to feel sorry for you for not listening to reason...it’s not hard to get your nose broken. Any fool can do it. In fact, maybe a broken nose can help you with your listening and reasoning ability.”

But I didn’t wait around for the beating or

At that point, I had had quite enough of carnival surfing—but on this particular billboard, someone had crudely added an amateurishly-painted footnote. “Starring the Wild, Wild Woman from Borneo.”



that painfully chiding footnote; I ran. I ran from the tent, from the carnival, from the little town and from the state of Tennessee. A month later I was a college freshman. I didn't however, go to the little school a few hours away from our hometown; I was afraid that it would have always reminded me of Ramona. Instead, I ended up at the university with the two frat cats who had picked me up hitching in Georgia. I even pledged their fraternity and was elected frat president my senior year. My two frat brothers never mentioned our excursion through Tennessee, but they did insist on putting on a circus every year to raise money for our various house parties, and I was always the ringmaster.

My grades were good enough to get me into Harvard's law school, and I landed a cushy corporate law job immediately after graduating. One thing led to another—I met a nice girl, we had a couple of kids (a son and then a daughter) and we moved back south to Arkansas and fell into Southern politics. I have to admit, I was more successful than I ever would have imagined, and I ended up getting elected senator. And, to tell the truth, I had all but forgotten about Ramona and the crazy circus drama from all those years ago.

Then, this little carnival came through our town, and because I was a senator, I was invited to speak at the grandstand. Of course, by then, I was used to speaking at public gatherings, whether they were dedication ceremonies for new schools or highways, special church events or, as in this case, small-town carnivals.

After my speech and the obligatory photo opps, my wife thought it would be fun to take our eight-year-old son and six-year-old daughter to one of the sideshows, and to tell you the truth, seeing Ramona was absolutely the last thing on my mind that August night in Arkansas. I was too busy thinking about how the county newspaper was going to spin my speech—I had inadvertently referred to one of my ever-present political opponents as a "habitual communist." I had meant to say "habitual columnist," as in a *newspaper writer*, because he was always sending letters criticizing me to any editor or rag that would give him

ink. Consequently, what I intended as a gentle poke had turned into a major puncture wound.

Suddenly, however, there was Ramona. She had apparently spotted me before I had a clue as to what was going on. Her show was still flamboyant—feathers, fur, tail and all, and her smile was as brilliant as ever. Although it was quite a shock to me, as far as I could tell, my wife never made the connection between her husband and the *wild woman* up on the stage. Frankly, I was amazed that my wife never suspected a thing, or if she did, she was either letting it slide or saving it for some future retaliation. However, I also realized that—at least for a fleeting moment—the old Ramona-shaped hole in my heart threatened to re-open. Fortunately, it healed itself just as quickly—even before Ramona got off the makeshift stage, in fact.

Still, it was to my great relief that we quickly exited the tent—and the carnival grounds—immediately after Ramona's performance. There was no exchange of words, either between me and Ramona, nor between me and my wife. As we climbed into our car in the dirt-and-gravel carnival parking lot, I glanced at my reflection in the rearview mirror and saw that I was sweating like a sieve, and it wasn't just from the August heat; *I felt like I had dodged a bullet*—and not just for the afternoon, but for my career and family, as well.

Unfortunately, as with so many things in life, the feeling was short-lived.

As I glanced again in the rearview, I caught a glimpse of my six-year-old daughter. There was a purplish gleam in her eyes, and she flashed a strange and mysterious smile; it was one that I had seen before, but never on her sweet little face, and when I saw it, I realized that smile—along with the eight words that would accompany it—would introduce a new era of drama into our previously-sedate family life.

"I love the wild, wild woman from Borneo," she softly said, as I pulled out onto the highway.



Click here to hear the musical version of "The Wild, Wild Woman from Borneo"



The Color of Forgiveness

By Pete Mattix

A

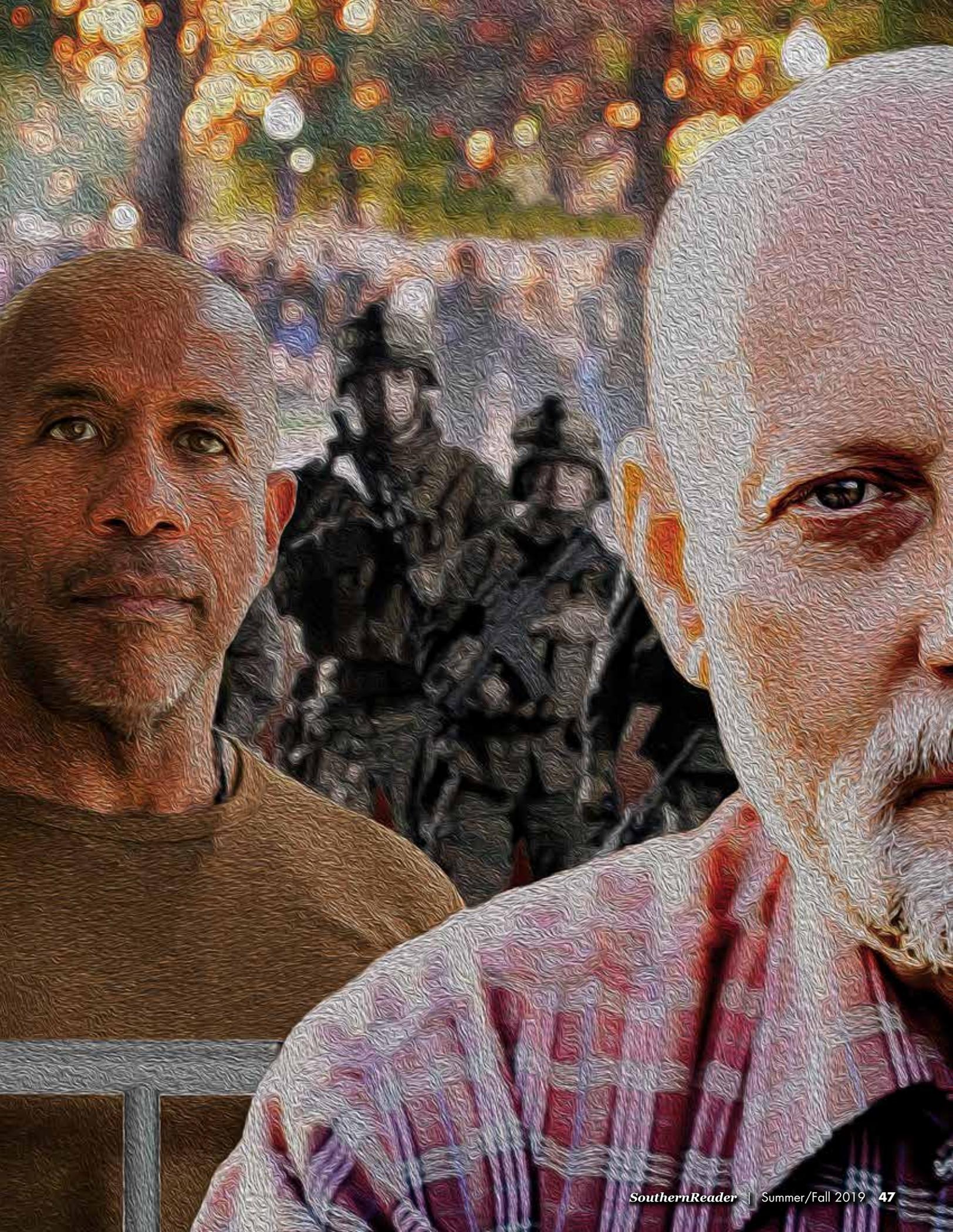
s a minister, I have been privileged to witness a number of amazing and miraculous events, in a variety of scenarios and locales. However, there was one such event that I observed before I began my ministerial life.

It happened about fifteen years ago, when I was still working for a major company as a salesman. As an elder in my church in the suburbs of Atlanta, I was invited to attend a Christian men's retreat in the mountains of North Georgia, and it was to include about 40 men from all across the state. None of the men—I would come to understand—knew each other prior to attending the retreat, and the group consisted of a very diverse population. When I arrived, my initial thought was that it was going to be an interesting situation—it was a group of men on a three-day retreat from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. I remember thinking, "The outside world would probably think of this as a disastrous social encounter in the making."

The following days would not only prove me wrong, but in fact, I found that I was to be an observer of a true miracle. It was during the second

I remember thinking, "The outside world would probably think of this as a disastrous social encounter in the making."





day that I quickly realized the attendance of these men was a divine appointment, carefully orchestrated by God. On the evening of that second day, we gathered together for a time of praise and sharing, and it starting with some of the men sharing the typical things such as, “I would like to thank God for...” or, “I would like to be a better...” and, “I would like to ask God to forgive me of...”

But then, one of the men—a middle-aged, African-American man—stood up and began to share his story. He told us that he had lived in the South all his life and had endured a lifetime of racism and injustice, all because of the color of his skin. As tears began to stream down his face, he began to confess the anger and bitterness that

this bigotry had caused in his life and how it had caused him to have a deep hatred for white people. He then went on to describe a dramatic event that had happened one January morning in 1987.

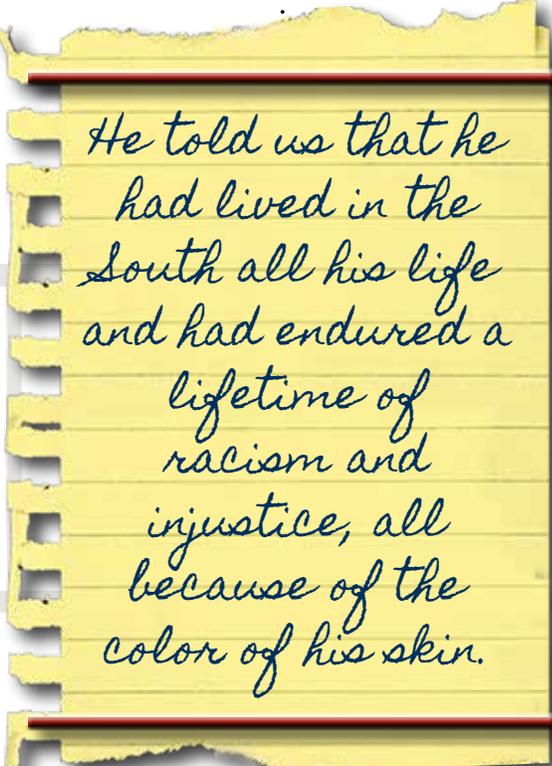
Most of us were familiar with the rural county in Georgia where the event had occurred. It was a county that had long been known as a “whites-only” sanctuary. It was precisely because of that, the man told us, that famed civil rights leader Hosea Williams led a racially-mixed group of protesters as they marched to the county’s courthouse to bring attention to the area’s continued racial injustices. He was there, he said, alongside Hosea. As they

began their march, a large group of loud and angry KKK members, who had assembled behind the barricades, suddenly charged at them and pounded them with rocks and racial slurs, along with bottles and other hurled objects. He was spit on by one of the members of the KKK, and he remembered the feel of the spit as it was running down his face.

The Georgia National Guard was there that morning, and they stood between his group and the KKK members, who were held at bay by a line of wooden barricades. In fact, the man said, if it wasn’t for the Guard, many of his group may have been seriously injured, or even killed, because, in one split second, the angry men jumped the barricades to

attack the marchers. Fortunately, the Georgia National Guard was able to maintain control and push them back behind the barricades. Still, he said, the amount of hate and anger was overwhelmingly frightening to observe.

At this point in his story, the black man paused. The room had fallen silent as each of us pictured the passion of that January morning in the not-so-distant past. Suddenly, a man in the second or third row stood up. He was white and middle-aged, and he began to weep. He sobbed uncontrollably for several minutes before he could gain his composure to speak. And then, with a strong southern drawl, he introduced himself. As he continued



He told us that he had lived in the South all his life and had endured a lifetime of racism and injustice, all because of the color of his skin.

to weep, he turned and faced the black man and said, “Brother, I was also there that day. Do you remember seeing the KKK member that wore the fancy hood on that day of the march? The one who gave the charge for the members to jump the barricades and attack your group? That was me, brother. I was the one who gave the order. I was the KKK wizard who was in charge that day.”

As this burly-looking country boy continued to stand and weep, he began to tell his story. He told us that he had left his home that morning with a younger brother, and as he was leaving, his mother asked, “Where are you boys going?”

“We’re going to kill us some n—,” he had told his mother, and then he slipped a loaded gun in the pocket of his robe.

“My mama was a Godly woman,” he told us, the tears still streaming down his cheeks, “And while we were trying to get over those barricades, she was back home. She spent the entire day on her knees for her sons that day—not only that they would not carry out their plan to kill, but she also begged God to change their hearts. Our hearts.”

As he finished his story, an incredible thing happened. He walked over to his black brother and embraced him, and the two cried in each other’s arms. As they continued to weep, he begged the black man to forgive him for his hatred. Then, the white man led his black

brother to a chair in front of the group, and he asked if he would be seated. Then, he removed the shoes and socks from his black brother’s feet and requested that someone bring them a wash bowl with water and a towel, and he began to follow the example of our Lord and Savior by washing the man’s feet. Then, the black man stood up and requested that the white man be seated, and he proceeded to wash his feet.

Although it’s been fifteen years since that amazing retreat in the mountains, as I look around today, I still can see the hate and distrust that continues to surround us and divide us. Wouldn’t it be incredible if our nation—and our world, for that matter—could experience what we were able to witness

that evening in the Georgia mountains during that time of sharing and praise?

As impossible as it may seem, there actually is a solution to our nation’s racial divide—but it’s not a political, financial, or cultural answer. It’s a spiritual solution and it’s the one that the man’s mama completely and faithfully understood. It’s the solution that she went to her knees to ask for, that cold winter day in January of 1987.



Pete Mattix is the minister of a community church in middle Georgia.

“I was the one who gave the order. I was the KKK wizard who was in charge that day.”

The Golden Sound of Silence

By Ron Burch

A

h...peace and quiet. What a wonderful thing it is. Maybe that's why I enjoy writing—in solitude—away from life's rattle and clatter—where the only sound is me, pecking away on my keyboard.

My wife calls my computer room *The Ivory Tower*. I think of it more as Walden Pond—a place where my mind is free to roam without distraction. A place where, like a bird on the wing, my thoughts can flit from perch-to-perch, or silently sail away to the unknown and undiscovered. A place where, like the title to one of Rod McKuen's books, I can "listen to the warm."

The beautiful sound of silence is lost in today's world—buried beneath tons of decibels, littered about by air hammers, boom boxes, radios, television, loud trucks, sirens and screeching tires. We've long accepted such noise in the city as a matter of fact. But these days, there's noise in the country, too. The sounds of tractors, pickers, crop dusters and engine-driven irrigation systems blend with the sound of traffic on the nearby interstate.

People have grown so accustomed to having some kind of noise as a constant companion, they use their music to shut out the world, everywhere they go—shopping, jogging, even on a quiet walk down a country road.

I don't know about you, but when the sound of loud music, an outside conversation or unexpected noise reaches my ears, my creativity shuts down. I can't think. I can't focus. I'm hopelessly distracted.

Cows may give more milk in the presence of music, but I ain't no cow.

Now, that isn't to say I don't like music. I do. In fact, whenever I'm performing a mindless task like raking leaves or cutting grass, I always have my headset on. But whenever I'm trying to use my brain—shhh. I like it quiet.

Scientific studies claim that conversations up to fifty feet away can be a cause for distraction. Office workers who recently participated in a study on privacy-related issues list "overheard conversation" as their biggest complaint. While people can get used to many noises—perhaps to the point where their brains tune out the distractions—some find it nearly impossible to disregard intelligible human speech.



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the world,
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a country road.



To combat the problem of noise, especially in confined environments, many companies now pump in acoustically-tuned white noise over ceiling speakers. The process is called sound masking, and office planners and environmentalists like the Herman-Miller company have studied its benefits extensively. Independent research has documented productivity gains of eight to thirty-eight percent, job satisfaction increases of 125 to 174 percent and reductions in stress up to twenty-seven percent. Yet, there is ongoing skepticism that has limited adoption of sound masking by American businesses.

It seems that Americans like noise. They put Thunderheaders on their Harleys. Purple Hornie glasspacks on their cars. Surround sound and sub-woofers on their televisions and DVDs. Restaurants have gone to a hard environment to make even a small crowd sound like a party. Every mall, department store and grocery chain pipes in music chosen for the season or the demographics of their market. Automotive sound systems have gone from one 5"x7" dash-mounted speaker to as many as a dozen... each one capable of flexing its muscle to the max when stimulated by megawatts of power.

I don't understand our universal discomfort with silence. What happened to "Silent night, holy night, all is calm and all is bright?" Let the conversation wane for even a moment and someone will jump in to further explain their point-of-view or repeat what they just said.

My biggest gripe by far concerns the media. Yelling and screaming talk show host,

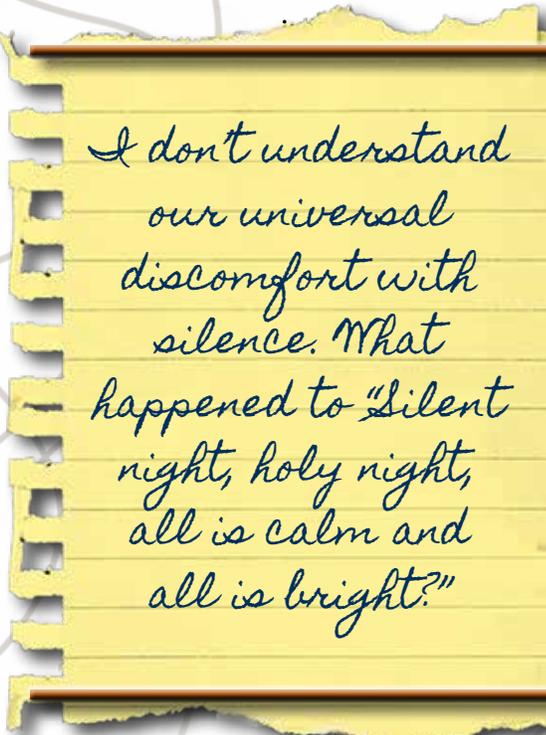
jabbering talking heads and stupid, loud commercials.

Nowhere is dead air scarcer than during a sports broadcast. Even though we saw the play with our own two eyes and heard the play-by-play as it happened with our own two ears, the play-by-play announcer feels duty bound to tell us what we saw, then tell us again what he's already told us. "He thought he saw a hole at right tackle, but WAM..."

Worse still, while the play-by-play announcer rests his cords, the color man analyzes the psychology of the play in minute detail and updates us with the running back's statistics. He adds background about the player's recent injuries, his family, his golf score, where he lives, how he dresses, his preferences in breakfast cereal and what he had for dinner last night.

Since I can't relax and escape the noise watching a football game on a dreary Sunday afternoon, I'm up here in my Ivory Tower—my beloved Ivory Tower. A holy place where, like the song said, "no one dared disturb the sound of silence."

Ah, yes—peace and quiet. Time to ponder, time to think. Maybe for my birthday I can get a keyboard with silent keys.



I don't understand our universal discomfort with silence. What happened to "Silent night, holy night, all is calm and all is bright?"



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.

Owen's Back!



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GOODBYE RUSTIC BRICK SIDEWAY