

Southern Reader

AN ONLINE MAGAZINE ABOUT LIFE IN THE SOUTH

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College memories of a legendary Tennessee coach

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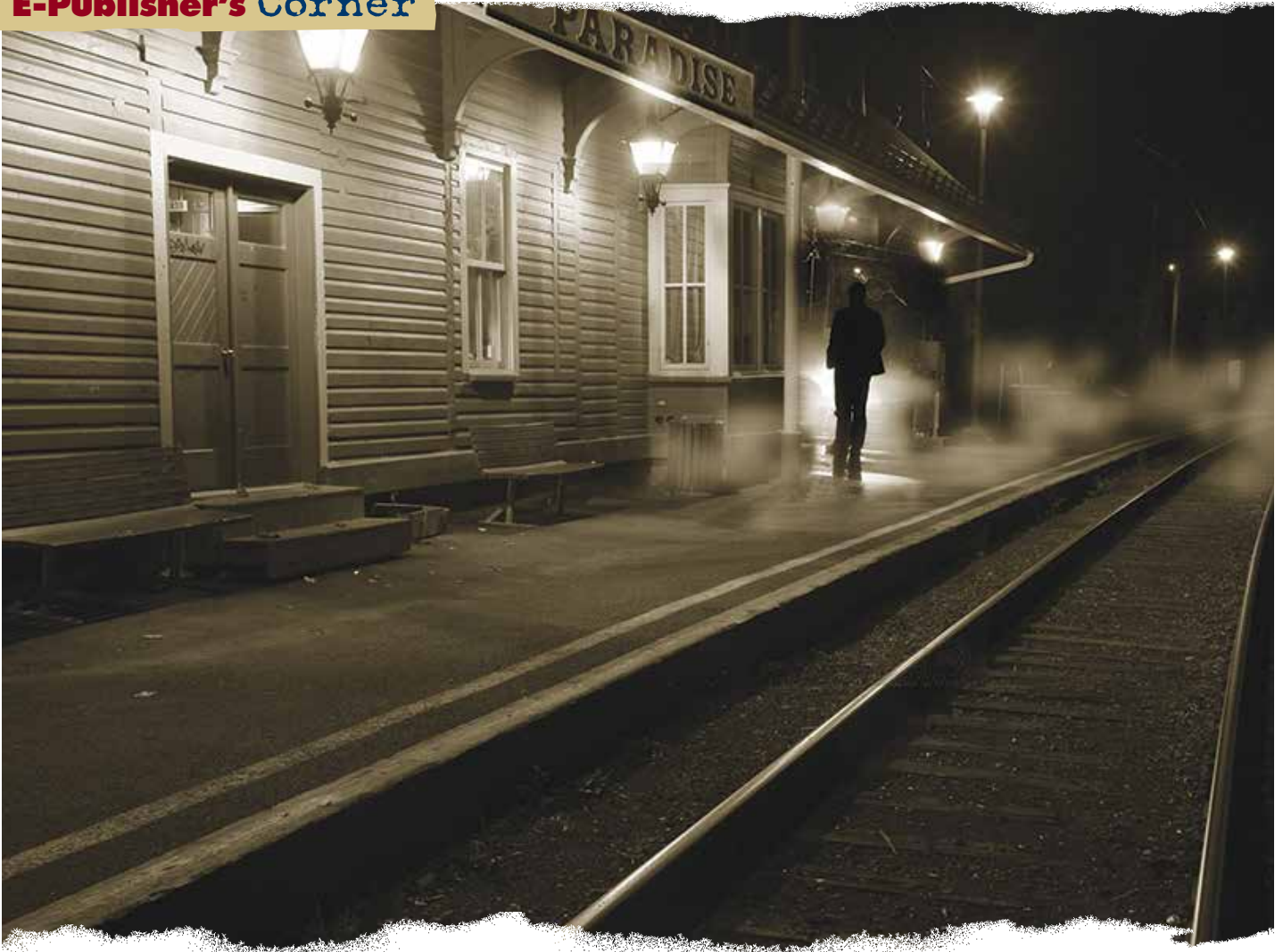
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David Skinner



Paradise on the Burlington Line

WOn the train headed west on the Burlington Line, he sat down beside me that night. He said, “I just need to rest, see, I don’t have much time, and that station is nearly in sight.”

Those were the opening lines to “The Burlington Line,” a song I wrote back in the mid-’70s. “A song I wrote” really isn’t the most accurate description; I actually was playing the part of scribe/narrator when I scribbled the words down. It could just as easily have been a diary entry from my Amtrak pilgrimage to the west coast in the summer of 1975.

Once I had made up my mind to begin my *quest west* (it was a spur-of-the-moment thing one Sunday afternoon at a family get-together), I

asked my sister, Jann to drive me to Nashville’s old Union Station. I threw my suitcase and guitar in the trunk of our old ’64 black Falcon, and we drove off while my relatives stared incredulously as if they were being punked.

Once we arrived at Union Station, I bought a ticket to Portland and waited in the old terminal for the Miami-to-Chicago train, which would launch the first leg of my trip.

It had been years since I had been in the old Union Station, and it was a sobering sight. Built in 1900 as a high-

ly-castellated example of late-Victorian Romanesque Revival architecture, after the decline of railway service to Nashville in the late ’50s and early ’60s, it had fallen into ill repair; it was tired and sad, but still very beautiful. Most of the inside of the terminal had been closed off, except for a small area that served as the station’s waiting room. As I pondered all the generations of people who had traveled through the old station, my reverie was broken by the arrival of my train, which I gratefully boarded to shake off the foreboding shadow the old station had cast across my path.

Soon we were skirting Nashville’s northern suburbs, and as the Tennessee sun began to sink, the train streamed northward on the old tracks of the L&N.

I had been on that stretch of tracks before; one of the highlights of my second grade year at McGavock Elementary School was the celebrated and always highly-anticipated "Train Ride Field Trip."

This field trip was one for the ages—my teacher, classmates, and chaperones were taken by school bus to Union Station, which, at the time (it was the late 1950s), was still a transportation contender in downtown Nashville. We all buddy-system-boarded a north-bound passenger train, which took us through north-east Nashville on to Gallatin, where we exited and took the long journey back to the elementary school via the more familiar and by then, mundane, asphalt highway.

I briefly reflected on that long-ago trip as we blew past the old Gallatin terminal, but as we approached the tunnel north of Gallatin, I immediately realized that this was the stretch of tracks that Confederate General John Hunt Morgan and his men had pulled up, twisted, and re-routed a century before during Nashville's occupation by the Union Army in the early part of the Civil War.

In fact, the very tunnel that my 1975 Amtrak train was entering at that moment had been closed down by Morgan and his men; they had captured a train, loaded it and the tunnel with explosives and sent the locomotive at full speed into the tunnel, where it encountered a log blockade in the center. The resulting explosion closed down the L&N and the Union Army's supply into Nashville from the north.

Years later I chronicled this and

other of Gen. John Hunt Morgan's exploits in a Civil War concept album (equilt.com/johnmorgan.html). The specific song about the Gallatin tunnel incident, "Black Clouds Above the L&N" (equilt.com/landn.html) was written

coaster that would take me down to Portland.

I don't remember much about that first night as we rolled west across the prairie. I do remember waking up the next morning as the train began its long trek across Montana. I had fallen asleep in the double-decked skyliner car and I was awakened by Montana's famous big sky, falling all around the train like an electric blue drop cloth. That whole day was a picture postcard; the train meandered through the Montana mountains, stopping off for an hour at a time at Billings, Livingston, and Bozeman. There were cowboys and Indians on horses at each of the stations, waiting patiently for the train. It was as if they were wanting to verify and validate Hollywood's westerns from the '40s and '50s. It was Disneyland meets Bonanza, in real time.

After Butte, once again the Amtrak sun was hanging

low, and I decided to treat myself to a meal in the dining car. The dining car was set up like one would expect, but the table space was much more limited than that of a restaurant not on wheels. Consequently, the hostess had no qualms about seating me with whomever was sitting by themselves.

For my dining partner, she chose an elderly gentleman who was gazing over his menu at the mountain landscape as it blurred past the diner car's windows. He was facing the back of the train, so the landscape that he was watching was quickly fading away behind the train in the early evening shadows.

We exchanged pleasantries, but I got the impression that he would have been perfectly happy eating in silence.



It had been years since I had been in Union Station, and it had fallen into ill repair; it was tired and sad, but still very beautiful.

from the point of view of Basil Duke, Morgan's brother-in-law and second-in-command. Duke survived the war and later went to work as chief counsel and lobbyist for the L&N, the very railroad he had spent years trying to destroy.

As we crossed into Kentucky, it had already begun to get dark. As I watched the twinkling lights from the houses that backed up to the tracks, I drifted off to asleep. When I awoke, it was early morning and we were rolling into Chicago. Chicago found me running through its own Union Station, suitcase and old guitar in hand, breathlessly catching the *North Coast Hiawatha*, the train that would take me to Minneapolis and then, on to Seattle, where I would jump on a west

However, after our food arrived, still looking out the window, he said, "I worked 50 years for Burlington."

"Who?" I asked.

"The Burlington Line," he said. "Now, it's Burlington Northern. We're running on the Burlington Northern's tracks."

"Oh," I said.

"My wife passed away—it's been years ago. I've been back east visiting my children. This will probably be my last trip back east," he said, his voice trailing off.

It made me a little uncomfortable, so I tried to shift the subject. "Where are you getting off?" I asked. Behind him I could see we were approaching a tunnel.

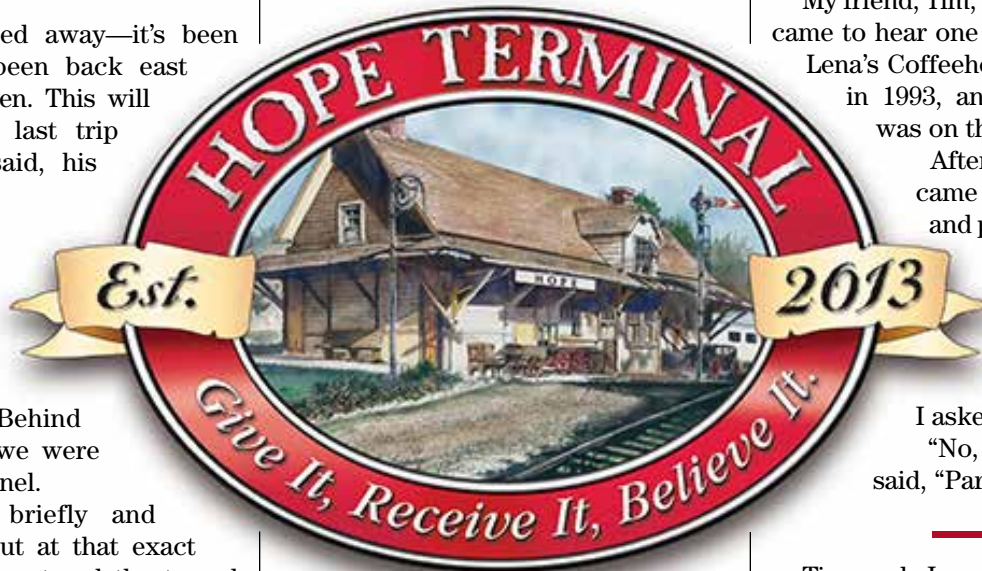
He hesitated briefly and then answered, but at that exact moment the train entered the tunnel and the engineer blew a loud, long, lonesome whistle, "WA-A-A-A-A-A-AH!" I saw his lips moving, but the train's whistle drowned out everything throughout the dining car. I felt like it would be impolite to ask again, so I just nodded. I told him I was headed to Seattle and then on to Portland, but he didn't elaborate on his destination.

"Best of luck to you," he said, smiling and folding his napkin as he got up to leave. "Nice meetin' you."

"You, too," I said. I paid my check and returned to my seat a few cars back. It had gotten dark, and since there wasn't anything to see out the windows—we were in the middle of the mountains—I pulled out my old dog-eared paperback and settled back in my seat.

An hour or two later, I felt the train slowing down, and I saw what I figured had to be a station coming into view. It was an eerie sight, though; the evening fog had rolled in and had all but swallowed the tiny mountain train station. There were a few lamps bravely trying to penetrate the fog, but the station's sign was impossible to make out. I quickly pulled out the roadmap I had been traveling with to see if I

could figure out where we were. There was nothing on the map—we were apparently in the middle of nowhere. I leaned close to the window, and as I did I could see that my elderly dinner partner was exiting from the passenger car in front of mine. He sat his suitcase down on the misty platform and looked up at the train. I knew he could



see me, because the inside overhead lights of my car had come on as soon as the train stopped, and I could see my reflection in the glass. He nodded at me and gave a slight wave, then turned with his suitcase and was absorbed by the fog. By then, the train had slowly started moving on down the tracks. I moved quickly to the back of the car, still peering out the windows to see if I could get a glimpse of the station's name or of my friend who had vanished into the night. Suddenly, as the train began to slowly pick up speed, the fog parted just as we passed the center of the tiny building, and that's when I saw the name. First, the "P" and "A" were the only visible letters.

"There goes Pa," I thought, still scanning the night for the old man. But then, the rest of the sign came into view, for only a split second: "PARADISE."

I went back to my map—there was still no "Paradise" there. I looked around the car. Everyone was either asleep or engrossed in a book or magazine. It was like a dream. I pulled out my notebook and wrote down what I could remember.

About six months later, long after I had returned to Tennessee from the west coast, I stumbled across the notebook with the lines of old man's story scribbled down. I finished the song, which I called "Burlington Line," in a couple of hours, and I've been playing it in coffeehouses, theaters, taverns and cafes since 1976.

My friend, Tim, and his wife, Joanna, came to hear one of my bands play at Lena's Coffeehouse in Atlanta back in 1993, and "Burlington Line" was on the set list.

After the concert, we all came back to our house, and pulled out our instruments.

"Play 'Paradise' again," Tim said.

"Do you mean 'Burlington Line'?"

I asked.

"No, the train song," he said, "Paradise."

Tim and Joanna left Georgia for Texas a few years after that, and they later settled in Little Rock. Through it all, Tim and I stayed in touch, and he often brought up the song. "Tell me again about that old man in your song, 'Paradise.'"

"Burlington Line," I'd correct him.

"Yeah, Paradise," he'd say.

In December of 2009, Tim was helping with his church's Christmas Eve Service. About an hour before the service, he got a call from his doctor saying that the test that they had done a few days before had come back and had shown that he had cancer at the base of his tongue.

In the years to follow, Tim had numerous surgeries and chemo treatments, but through it all, he remained steadfast. In fact, when he was eventually diagnosed as terminal, he told me that "hope should be our final destination," and he founded *Hope Terminal*, with the tagline, "Give it, receive it, believe it."

During the last few years, Tim and I had numerous conversations about Paradise—and about "Burlington Line."

"I want you play 'Paradise' at my funeral," he told me.

"Burlington Line?" I said. "That's a train song. I've never sung it in a church, so you're gonna need to write me an excuse to sing it, and that is if it ever comes to that; you may end up outliving me. You never know."

And come to think of it, that really was the point of the song. You live life the best you can, and hang on for the ride, and then you get off when the train stops at your destination.

But, as it turned out, I did play the song at Tim's memorial service one crisp Saturday afternoon in late January. The last few times I spoke with him, he reminded me of his request for me to play it. "Here's a song called 'Paradise,'" I told his family and friends as I strapped on my guitar.

That night, as I drove back to Atlanta from Little Rock, I took a detour off of Interstate 40 into downtown Nashville. Driving down Broadway brought back a treasure trove of memories from my childhood—downtown Christmas parades, beautiful spring mornings in Centennial Park, and sweltering summer family reunions at my Aunt Lola's downtown "mansion." Most of my family is gone now, so it was a bittersweet tour.

Driving by Union Station, I was startled by its brilliance; it had been restored and is now an award-winning Marriott hotel. It sparkled in the Nashville night like a polished, cherished and priceless shiny jewel. I couldn't help but think about my friend, Tim, the old man on the train, the Burlington Line...and Paradise.

David Ray Skinner

david@Bridgital.com

SouthernReader

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Merry 4th of July

by Lisa Love

FROM: Lisa Love
TO: Percy Baxter, President, HOA of Gestapo Gardens Subdivision
RE: Fines can be Levied for Noncompliance of HOA Tenets
July 20, 2015 10:32 A.M.

Dear Percy,

This email is to confirm that this morning I received your HOA letter regarding my Christmas tree. Needless to say, I was taken aback to think that my tree could cause you and the Association such consternation. Honestly, I'm confused as to the nature of my infraction—is it that my tree is still prominently displayed in my living room window in July? Or is your grievance that some of the twinkle lights aren't twinkling anymore, and my tree is only half lit (which truly, I suspected you might've been when you composed

your letter)? Of all the issues, large and small, plaguing our subdivision (such as the front entrance sprinkler system routinely malfunctioning and spewing geysers of water hundreds of feet into the air), I find it rather bemusing that my tree is *Number 1* on your hit list of "Things to Be Addressed at the Next HOA Meeting."

Nonetheless, I respect your authority as president of the association, so I would like to take this opportunity to give you the background 411, just in case there's a plan to haul me before Judge Judy. After hearing the rest of the story, you too might come to appre-

ciate "*The Artificial Tree That Would Not Die.*"

First, I blame this predicament on my delight—no, my fanciful obsession—with twinkle lights! Yes, dancing, sparkly twinkly Christmas lights NEVER fail to brighten my mood and plaster a huge grin on my face! How 'bout you, Percy? Not so much, I take it. *And in July, you ask?* Let me try to explain.

Last year as the holidays approached, I told myself that Christmas 2014 was going to be different. *It really was!* My hope? A peaceful, organized, joy-filled Christmas. My heart's desire was a simpler celebration where the true meaning—Christ's birth—was *not* going to be shoved aside like the Nativity under the tree where it would become overshadowed by the mountain of gifts surrounding it. Nope, I said, Jesus was to be honored, and I was not to go crazy.

Well, it was a nice thought, anyway.

My strategy? First, put to death the accusatory voice of Martha Stewart that usually rings in my ears. Her evil chants of, "DO MORE, DO IT BIGGER, ALL HOMEMADE" typically steals my Christmas joy faster than a big city rioter nabbing a 55-inch flat screen! Mind you, "Millionaire Martha" has a staff of thousands at her beck and call to manufacture those visions of candied sugarplums that dance crazily in her "*it's a good thing*" head. I have a somewhat smaller staff of one, so I was determined to boycott her Christmas specials AND her holiday magazine issues this year. Truthfully, I thought I might be just three signatures away from being involuntarily committed to a *12-Step Program for "Crazy Expectations and Christmas Chaos Withdrawals."*

You know the recipe for Christmas chaos, don't ya? Take one *people pleaser* (ME!), add unrealistic expectations bombarding you from the media (thank you, MARTHA!), fold in an already hectic work schedule, blend in office parties, mandatory *Secret Santa* gift exchanges and choir practice for the Christmas program. Sprinkle liberally with broken ornaments, last-minute dashes to the mall and hemorrhaging bank accounts. Add splashes of weariness and disappointment and simmer with one bickering family (MINE!). Finally, bring all those dream-dashing ingredients to a rolling boil! Merry Christmas? Bah, humbug!

So...what was my prayer for Christmas 2013? Keep a tight lid on chaos, clutter and commercialism. This year, the focus would be on Jesus!

This focus, however, was quickly blurred by the 2013 HOLIDAY DEBACLE. "What DEBACLE?" you ask? Oh, surely you heard all about it from the neighbors. Around here, we took to calling it "The Night that the Lights Went Out in Georgia"! But

hey, from the smoldering Holiday ashes rose a Phoenix in the shape of a brand-spanking-new ten-foot Colorado spruce with 1200 twinkly lights. Expensive, yes—but I got to order it online, it was delivered in less than four days and when it arrived, the delivery guy even took the huge box



Apparently, Buddy had taken a turn for the worse, turning from a terrier into a holy terrier-ist.

down to my basement for me! Thank you, Target and *uber helpful* UPS man. You helped me start my journey to a more stress-free Christmas!

But I digress...back to the aforementioned DEBACLE. What exactly was the straw that broke the Christmas camel's back? Honey, not just the camel, but the sheep, and anyone else standing guard over the baby Jesus. I remember it like it was—well—like it was last year! One evening, while enjoying the glow of the tree—*filled with enough twinkly lights to cause retinal damage*—I glanced down at the Nativity and noticed that there was getting to be quite a bit more "room in the inn," so to speak. Wow, can you say "*All Points Bulletin*" for Nativity figurines? Upon closer inspection, it appeared that the camels and sheep had been forcibly relocated (as per the

tell-tale bite marks). Maybe I should have noticed sooner, but work and "Christmas-ing" had kept me preoccupied! However, while I may have taken slight notice of the disappearance of the livestock, it was the systematic beheading of two of the three wise men that really grabbed my attention. And trust me, You don't EVEN want to know what atrocity was visited upon sweet Joseph.

Searching the living room, I found mangled, headless bodies unceremoniously buried in a ficus tree plant and under sofa cushions. The Evil Doer? It appeared that Buddy, my black terrier, had declared the *Mother of all Jihads* against my manger; yes, he was waging the ultimate *War on Christmas*.

I felt betrayed, obviously, Buddy had lulled me into a false sense of security; it had been a while since he had gone on a "chewing spree"—I really thought the incident in which he "bridge-jacked" my elderly aunt's false teeth had been a dramatic end to his canine crime. But, apparently he had taken a turn for the worse, turning from a terrier into a holy terrier-ist.

It may have taken me a while to catch on to his doggy carnage, but it was his brazen disregard for Christmas and all things holy that finally pushed me over the edge. My living room became *Ground Zero* the night the furry Jihadist dropped a chewed-up baby Jesus at my feet.

"Oh no, you didn't!" I screamed at Buddy. This mangled figurine before me was the equivalent to waking up with a horse's head in my bed. YOU DON'T MESS WITH THE BABY JESUS, Devil Dog! As I attempted to snatch it up to safety, Buddy—as if carrying out the wishes of King Herod himself—clamped his jaws around the babe and made a dash for the tree. Within the safe confines of the low-hanging branches, he turned to stare at me, eyes defiant as he chomped on the figurine with the same fervor he

chomped on the expensive deer antlers I got him from PetSmart.

That did it. MY war on HIS terror had taken an ominous turn. I angrily stomped toward Buddy, which just made him dive further under the tree with rebellious abandon. I shimmied on my stomach under the tree to wrestle the baby Jesus from the drooling locked jaws of the furry felon, but he eluded my grasp once more. I slithered in further under the tree, and once I cornered the wild eyed beast, I popped him on the nose with a rather gaily wrapped Christmas gift. Momentarily stunned, he dropped the figurine, and high tailed it from under the tree, as he let out a growl that sounded a lot like "Ali Akbark, WOOF, WOOF." I stretched out my trembling arm and grasped the slobbered-on Christmas child! I saved Jesus, I saved Jesus, my heart sang.

However, my exuberant joy was short lived. As Buddy had made his hurried retreat, the extension cord to the tree lights had gotten wrapped around one of his hind legs. Clutching the baby Jesus figure to my chest, I swear I heard it before I felt it. Yep, T-I-M-B-E-R! Before I could slide out from under the tree, it toppled. On my stomach, prostrate, I was surrounded by shattered glass ornaments—many that had belonged to my Nana—and twinkly lights that were no longer happily twinkling, but were sparking and hissing. *Are you kidding me?* Was I really going to get electrocuted for trying to save baby Jesus?

I started to whimper, but I was only allowed to wallow in my despair for a moment, as the power started to flicker, then total darkness descended. (hence, the afore-mentioned reference to "The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia," Percy). Obviously, the shorting-out twinkly lights had tripped my circuit breaker. Thankfully, I'd gotten a stay of execution, and my demise was put on hold. However, still trapped under a toppled ten-foot tree in the dark, surrounded by shards of glass, I resumed crying while I pitifully

assessed my situation. I could scream, but, home alone, no one would hear me. I started wishing I had trained Buddy better; he could at least have notified the neighbors—Lassie style—that I was trapped under a tree. Hmmm, wasn't gonna happen. And then the thought occurred to me. Where are those Jehovah Witnesses when you need them? Any other time, there's a least three of them camped out on my doorstep, pamphlets in hand. Please. I'll promise to read one of the brochures if you'd just CALL 911!

An hour later—and no sign of religious zealots coming to help—I finally managed to overcome my paralyzing fear of shattered glass and the mind-numbing darkness surrounding me

great tree to my family for years, and I thought perhaps it could still bring joy to another family. With that in mind, I called my friend Beth and cajoled her into helping me take the tree on a little ride to the Salvation Army on Main Street. Since, the tree was ten feet tall and my SUV wasn't, we decided to tether it to the top of my car. *Don't even ask!* To this day, I'm still surprised Beth even talks to me. FINALLY, after one hour of lifting, straining, precariously balanced on tippy toes, trying to stretch and fasten 15 narrow bungee cords across one wide tree, we decided that sucker wasn't going anywhere!

We drove ever so cautiously to the donation site, taking the turns slowly and smoothly. Careful driving aside, we still sang (screeched) at the top of our lungs to the Christmas carols on the radio, occasionally smiling at each other, enjoying our *Holiday Thelma-and-Louise* bond of

"...And we don't accept old tube televisions, either!"

enough to crawl out from under the prickly-needed tree to freedom. I was bruised, cut up and shaken, but alive. After tripping the breaker back on, I swept up the glass around the fallen tree and gauged the extent of the damage to it. Limbs were broken, most of my beloved twinkly lights stubbornly refused to twinkle, and the top of the tree was bent at a horrifying 90-degree angle. Yep, it was a goner. Right after I found Buddy and told him about his new family in Turkey (Ali Akbark, indeed, Hell Hound!), I hauled that once-gorgeous tree out to my garage, sliding it across the floor one inch at a time. Whew!

The next morning, I ordered a brand new Christmas tree from Target's website (it was so lush and sparkling in the online ad!), and began the L-O-N-G tedious journey of the disposing of the felled sacrificial yule log that was once my beautiful tree.

As in all things "Lisa" however, nothing is EVER as easy as it should be. Trying to find the old tree a new home was just as difficult as rehoming Buddy (Turkey rejected his Visa application!). Although the old tree had certainly seen better days, it had been a

benevolence. Because of our collective hernias—hoisting that tree onto the SUV almost killed us—some deserving family was going to have a more joyful Christmas. I guess on the ride there—with my heart filled with goodwill and cheer—I'd actually forgotten the sorry state of the Charlie Brown tree that was precariously sliding down onto the driver's side windshield as it made its journey to a new home. NOT SO FAST! As I pulled into its parking lot, the receiving guy from the Salvation Army snapped me out of my delusional reverie; he came out, climbed onto my running boards to give my tree the once over. Curtly, he knocked the wind right out of my charitable sails; THEY DID NOT WANT MY TREE! No way, no how! He said they wouldn't even let me throw it away there (I suspected he thought I was trying to use them as a dump. No-o-o-o, I wanted to share her with a family for Christmas!). I knew the tree had been through the ringer—the twinkly lights refused to twinkle and the limbs were all cockeyed—but couldn't someone else see the beauty left in it to love? Hmmm, he said "No, they could not." Embarrassed to have my worldly goods shunned by the

Salvation Army, I skulked back to my car—but not before he could tear at my last thread of dignity by shouting at us as we pulled out of the parking lot, “And we don’t accept old tube televisions, either!” Thanks, let me write that down.

With a mixture of disbelief and bewilderment, we made our way back to the house. A cold rain started to fall; I turned on the windshield wipers. The rejected Charlie Brown tree’s overhanging branch on my windshield repeatedly brought the wipers to a screeching halt. Over and over. Screech, thud, screech, thud. Beth and I looked at each other...and started to giggle. Then all out belly laughing—to the point where we couldn’t breathe. We were wheezing. Beth, through tears, got out, “Only you, Lisa. Only you!”

She managed to squeak out that last year, her grandmother had donated an ancient sofa that had an unmistakable aroma—a mixture of old lady and cheese—and they GLADLY took it. BUT NOT MY TREE! With tears of mirth covering our faces and cascades of rain pouring down the windshield, I pulled into the driveway and pushed the remote’s button to open the garage door. I giggled out loud one more time. “Beth, The Salvation Army DISSED me BIG TIME! THEY DISSED ME! Oh Lord, it IS ME?!”

I pulled into the garage. BAM! BAM!! BAM!!! Thunder? No. A ground jolting thud shook my SUV. Beth and I, upon impact, were thrown forward, straining against our seat belts. The car came to an abrupt halt, as did our hearts. WHAT WAS THAT? Scrambling from the car into the rain, we immediately saw the problem. Brain dead, I tell ya, Percy. I was officially brain dead! I had tried to drive into the garage COMPLETELY FORGETTING THE CHARLIE BROWN TREE WAS TETHERED TO THE TOP OF MY SUV!!! The tree had totally slammed head first, so to speak, into the wall above my garage door, busted loose from the cords and flown backwards

into the grass! Hearing the hullabaloo, my next door neighbor, Greg rushed over to see if we were okay. I actually smiled to myself as he approached us. “Out on my lawn there arose such a clatter; my neighbor sprang from his house to see what was the matter.” (Oh Percy, fun with words is one of the few things that keep me from TOTALLY cracking up).

After finding out we were only emotionally scarred, Greg asked if he could help us bring the tree inside. “NO!” we screamed in unison. Quickly explaining our morning’s “No-Good-Deed-Goes-Unpunished” escapade, he told me he could drag it to the curb

The tree had totally slammed head first, so to speak, into the wall above my garage door.

for trash pick-up. Funny, it actually hurt my heart a bit to just toss it. The rain was now torrential, and we were getting soaked to the bone as we encircled the tree. Greg dragged the Charlie Brown tree to the curb, and we all held hands and said a few words over it (nah, just wanted to see if you were still reading).

I patiently waited for trash day. And waited. And waited. Three rainy days later, pick-up day came and went—BUT Charlie Brown did not. Incensed, I called the sanitation service, and I was informed that they no longer picked up bulk items. *When did this happen?* Remember when trash men PICKED UP YOUR TRASH—ALL OF IT??? Those were the days, my friend! Am I waxing nostalgic ’bout the good old days of garbage collection? Heaven help me! It was official—my search for the perfect needy home for the imperfect needy tree was over. I. GAVE. UP. I called Greg and asked if he would just drag it around back and lay it in my basement. *Rest in Pieces*, Charlie Brown Tree. We called the time of death—5:22 PM.

Well, the months flew by, but memories of *The Debacle* never dimmed. I became a woman on a mission.

The goal? A simple, well-planned Holiday! December 2014’s mantra: “NO PROCRASTINATION” (Actually, that was Christmas 2013’s mantra, but it repeatedly got put on hold, then scrapped all together). The Christmas 2014 ground plan—aided by lists, organization and pre-buying from the previous year—started with the new tree and its pared down decorations being assembled and put up early. Christmas cards—from a pared-down list—mailed in a timely manner this year (as opposed to after Valentine’s Day!) And cookies (Pillsbury pre-sliced—Martha Stewart just fainted!) baked for the annual cookie exchange

party at my house—a gathering with a seriously pared-down guest list. Call it “A Partridge in a Pared Down Tree” kinda Christmas—sweet and simple!

Percy, you know the saying “*Man plans, God laughs*”? As soon as November rolled around, I was once again drowning in a vortex of work, family, holiday planning and parties; in football they call it piling on. In my life, they call it *Welcome to the Holidays, Girlfriend!* I had the sneaky suspicion that *Operation Christmas Calm* had already been driven off into a ditch. There was no way I could get all the cleaning, decorating and cooking checked off my already-busting-at-the-seams *to do* list.

Already at the breaking point, one more responsibility was added to my plate. My sister, Debbie, and I are very involved in a Christian Ministry that builds up leaders for Christ in the communities and local churches. Every three months, we all gather at a dinner—a feast, really—to share music, fellowship, food and faith! Debbie and I (with tons of help) oversee the production for the evening’s festivities—including emceeing. Well, this one was scheduled for the week after Thanksgiving, and we planned a glorious Holiday-themed extravaganza. This event takes weeks of planning, buying, prepping centerpieces and deciding on a menu. It’s work galore,

but we always have the time of our lives—as do all that attend. However, needless to say, with all my time and energy divided between work and this banquet, my own household decorating for Christmas was put on hold. There's always next year, I thought to myself as we unloaded our bins of decorations, dinnerware and centerpiece after pulling up to the venue that chilly fall day. Thank the Lord for all those that gathered with us to roll up their sleeves and help us knock it out; we worked tirelessly for hours getting all the finishing touches just right. About thirty minutes before the program began, I went into an empty stall in the ladies room to change clothes, fix

my hair and refresh my makeup. I also tried to gather my thoughts and calm down a bit—public speaking scares the pudding out of me—and every time I have to do this, I'm a quivering pillar of Jello! Talking to the Lord the entire time, I started to change my clothes from the ragged t-shirt and yoga pants (in which I'd worked up quite a sweat) into a fancier, CLEAN outfit! Hurriedly, I pulled out my blazer and top and hung them over the stall door. I went back to the hanger to get my dress pants. No, no, no! Where were my dress pants? They sure as shooting weren't in the stall with me. I was standing in my underwear in a handicapable stall! Well, wasn't that special? Using my cell, I sent out an urgent SOS, begging my girlfriends to come help me...PRONTO! One minute later, I had a search party combing the venue, my car, the parking lot...every inch of that place. I wanted—NO, *NEEDED*—MY DRESS PANTS!!! My friend Ellen thought this was the PERFECT time to remind me of a dream I'd shared with her weeks before. Knowing I dreaded speaking in front a large crowd, I shared with her that I'd had a dream where I was up on the stage, holding the microphone...in my underwear. Oh great. Turns out, I have the *gift of prophecy* (insert sarcastic smiley-face here)! Debbie came into the bathroom and tried to pry me

down off the ledge—or in this case out of the stall. She, Ellen and my other friends convinced me that my sweaty, nasty yoga pants would look just MARVELOUS. Sure! I'd be up on stage, and from that distance, along with complementing them with my blazer and jewelry, no one would be the wiser. Right! I resisted for a few minutes, but the clock was our enemy, the crowds had arrived and, as they say, the show must go on. Reluctantly, I put the sweaty yoga pants back on. Ellen did a wonderful job with my makeup and hair (I had started to

Percy, did I mention that I like surprises and I love Christmas?

sweat like a working girl in church!) The evening did go on and it was a smashing success (Debbie, myself and our great team put the *ho, ho, ho* back in hostessing). No one (but my inner circle) knew about the pants that had gone mysteriously MIA! I just prayed everyone stayed downwind of me!

After dinner, worship and communion, the night ended; then the *real* fun began. Although I was asleep on my feet at that point, it was time to dismantle this shindig and pack up. Once again though, many hands made light work; everyone was moving, folding, cleaning and sweeping. Others loaded all the bins back into my SUV. At 10:30 pm, I shuffled to my car on crying feet! Debbie came to hug me goodnight and as she did, she whispered in my ear, "I'm not supposed to say anything to you, but there's a surprise waiting for you at home. A little elf told me so!" *No fair, who are the elves?* I asked her. She smiled and said Heather and Adam (my niece and her son, my great nephew) had put up my tree for me. I could have burst out crying, I was so touched. And so exhausted. As I climbed in the car, she added, "By the way, burn those yoga pants!" Yes ma'am, older, wiser sister!

As weary as I was, the anticipation thrilled me. I couldn't wait to see my new tree in all of its twinkly light glory. Whoo, HOO. Percy, did I mention, I

like surprises and I love Christmas?

Finally home, I put the car in park and hopped out. What the heck? *What was that?* IMMEDIATELY I recognized my pants on the garage floor. Friends had been literally COMBING the venue in a grid formation looking for these pants! But, I was too tired to care; I snatched them off the dirty floor. At that point in the saga, my pants and I entered a "*Don't ask, don't tell*" policy.

Though it had been a long and tiring night, I was still filled with anticipation of seeing my new tree in all its glory. Thanking God for my wonderful giving family, I closed my eyes and opened the door to the living room. Deep breath and then... *WHAT???* I rubbed my eyes, and tried to refocus my

eyes. Surely they were deceiving me. Suddenly, I had the same sick feeling I had earlier that night when I couldn't find my pants. MY DISAPPOINTMENT WAS PALPABLE! Before me stood a crooked tree, listing to the right with remarkably few twinkle lights twinkling. It wasn't lush like the online ad had depicted; it was pitiful and sad—as was I. I tiptoed closer. My heart sank. The tree was so sparse; there were ghastly gaps between the branches—canyons of vast emptiness. Green cords woven in and out created an electrical superhighway all through the tree. Sadness turned to anger. *I had paid a fortune for this?*

Though the hour was late, I called my niece. Before I could ask her about this monstrosity in my living room, she began to talk; her words tumbling out like a waterfall. So excited and pleased, she asked me, "Aunt Wisi, do you love it?" I let out the breath I'd been holding since I first laid eyes on...*the tree*. And I listened. Really listened. She said they had worked on it all afternoon until late into the night; the tree had given them fits. The stand was bent and only half the twinkle lights would stay on. Investigating the cause, they changed all the fuses in the tree and tested each little bulb to try and find the problem. When that had failed—after two hours of trying—they had trekked to the Dollar Tree and bought

20 strands of lights ('cause they knew how much I loved lights). She went on to say that the tree looked kinda bare in spots, so they had gotten tiny branches from my backyard and stuck them in the tree here and there to fill in the empty spaces. And with pride in her voice, she said that she and Adam had rummaged through my Christmas bins and found the few remaining precious ornaments of Nana's that weren't destroyed last year—in the DEBACLE.

"Wisi, we wanted to surprise you and make it pretty!" As she talked, I looked at the ugly tree with new eyes; no, it didn't look ONE BIT like the picture in the ad or on the box. But love had put this tree up and decorated it for me. My family, knowing how jam-packed my schedule was and how tired I had been, gave me a gift money couldn't buy. They spent an entire evening putting together and decorating a tree for me (and trust me, that has never been their forte in the least!) SO it was definitely a labor of love. As she talked, I calmed my breathing and decided it wasn't that bad. My mama used to say, "People first, things Second." The tree didn't make Christmas; love and family did. I thanked her—a *real* thanks from my heart—and hung up. My heart feeling warm, I got up from the chair; hmmm, what was that I saw? Light was reflecting off something above the tree top. I got closer. Was that fishing line coming down from my ceiling? By golly it was. Fishing line was tied to the top of the tree and hung from a little hook in my ceiling. Lord help me, I was gonna kill 'em!

I could barely sleep all night, tossing, turning while my thoughts—and stomach—churned. I looked at the time on my cell repeatedly, just waiting until 9:00 AM to call Target's Customer Service 800 number and give them a piece of my mind—a piece I could ill afford to part with at that point. Before dawn, I gave up trying to sleep and rummaged through my office files to find my receipt for the tree. Thank goodness I'm an EXCELLENT record keeper—ohhh, that makes the

men swoon, I'm sure. I found not only the receipt, but the owner's manual and the warranty, as well. I went downstairs and brewed some coffee; a major caffeine jolt was needed for this mission. Walking past the tree on the way to the kitchen, I thought, MAYBE it wasn't as bad as I remembered—I mean I'd been so tired, right? I plugged in the cord to the tree and stepped back to gaze at it. Yep. Hideous.

Coffee in hand, I got on the phone to Target. After letting her know my predicament—crooked tree, lights didn't work, stand broken, branches missing—in my usual sweet, dulcet Southern tones, "Snippy Customer Service Girl" interrupted me to say there was ABSOLUTELY NOTHING

I plugged in the cord to the tree and stepped back to gaze at it. Yep. Hideous.

they could do for me, because I'd bought the tree last year. It was out of warranty, and it was too late for either a store credit or a cash refund. I tried to remain calm as I explained the reason I hadn't known the tree was UBER DEFECTIVE was that I bought it to use THIS Christmas, so when it was delivered, the nice UPS man put the unopened box in the basement to be stored until NOW! "Sorry," she said (she didn't sound sorry one bit!). I was finished trying Southern charm; it was time to bring out the big guns. I told her in no uncertain terms that I had all day to sit on the phone with her, her supervisor, his supervisor and his supervisor's supervisor. I said I didn't plunk this kind of money down for a tree that needed to be on life support—heck, it was being held up by fishing line, for goodness sakes—*straight out of the box*. I told her to put her feet up and buckle her seatbelt, 'cause this was going to be a bumpy ride! I then demanded her customer service I.D. number and her email address, because I was going to snap a pic of my receipt and this pathetic excuse for a tree; the pic was going to be emailed to her and forwarded to

her boss and all the local Atlanta news channels.

"Won't this be a great human interest story for Christmas time?" I purred into her ear. I sent the pic of the "Little Tree that Couldn't" to her email and waited for her to open it. She put me on hold. In my experience with customer service, I have found that the longer you keep them talking, eventually they will do the right thing—if no other reason than to make you hang up the dang phone and leave them in peace. I don't care. A win is a win. Twenty-seven minutes later (I knew she'd thought I'd hang up, oh silly girl!), she said that after conferring with her boss and showing him the tree's mug shot (she didn't say that!), he had decided to give me a complete refund to my credit card for my trouble. Gracious in victory, I thanked her and asked if they wanted me to return the tree. I swear I heard a snicker as

she said, "Lord no, we could never resell that pitiful excuse for a tree. Keep it, ma'am." I hung up pleased; it's true, the customer *IS* always right, ya know!

Well, almost. I tried to make the best of an ugly tree. My friend Ellen came over and made beautiful rose-colored silk bows to fill the empty cavities between the drooping branches. She wove the same ribbon in and out around the tree's trunk to try and add color, while simultaneously hiding all those green twinkle-light cords. Friends and family took to bringing an ornament with them every visit to hang on the tree to add to my collection and distract me from its GLARING imperfections. But life is short, and there are way more important things to worry about than this tree. Why was I complaining? I'd gotten a full refund and really, considering all the time, love and energy that had been put into the ugly tree by friends and family, it actually started to grow on me. Ya know, so ugly that its kinda cute. Like Jay Leno.

Three weeks after the ugly tree and I had made peace, I went down to the basement to get the bins I use to store my gift wrapping accessories—yes, I

was way late getting around to wrapping Christmas gifts! I made my way down the stairs, flipped on the light and turned the corner to my storage area. Grabbing two of the bins—one with paper and bows, the other holding decorative gift bags—I thought I'd give the basement a quick tidying up. Not a cleaning, just straightening boxes and papers. As I made my way to the back corner of the basement, I saw the box that my new Christmas tree had come in. Ugh, the picture on the outside of it once again taunted me with LIES! It didn't look anything like that *Pristine Winter Wonderland Beauty*. Getting closer, I got angry all over again at the blatant false advertising. It would have been SO LOVELY!! Now closer to the box, I bent down to read what all it was supposed have have been like...when I noticed something. The box was totally taped up. Why did Heather and Adam tape up the empty box? I kicked at it. OUCH! *Oh Lord, it wasn't empty.* THE BOX WAS TAPED UP AND IT WASN'T EMPTY!!! My mind was whirling. I couldn't process this. THE BOX IS TAPED UP AND IT ISN'T EMPTY! Think Lisa, think! Wait a minute. It hit me. Where was that Charlie Brown Tree? The tree Buddy had helped

to topple? The sad tree that Salvation Army wouldn't even take. Where was the tree that had hit the wall of my house with blunt force trauma from the top of my car? The tree I couldn't even get the trash man to haul away? The tree that Greg had dragged out of a three-day rain and dumped it in this very same basement? WHERE WAS THE CHARLIE BROWN TREE? Frantically,

Percy, this tree is going nowhere; not till it falls over on its own.

I looked all over the basement. But I knew. Yes, I knew where the Charlie Brown tree was... IT WAS IN MY LIVING ROOM. They had brought up the CHARLIE BROWN TREE!!!

Oh my word! Time to call Target. (Insert embarrassed face here!)

Percy, I feel sure that you probably quit reading this email 'bout halfway through it—probably around the wise men beheadings. Just let me say, I've grown to love and admire this tenacious little half-lit tree; a tree hanging on by a thread (literally), that embodies my life's motto—*never quit*. Never surrender! So my tree, in all its faded glory has had hearts on it for Valentine's Day,

shamrocks for St. Paddy's and Easter eggs to celebrate the Resurrection at Easter! Each holiday that passes, more lights quit twinkling and more needles fall. As I write this to you, my ugly little tree is covered in tiny American flags, ever so proudly, crookedly listing to one side in front of my living room window. Percy, this tree is going nowhere; not till it falls over on its own (and that fishing line is pretty darn tough!).

But respecting the authority of you and the HOA, tonight, under cover of darkness, I will drive by your house and slip the check covering my fine into

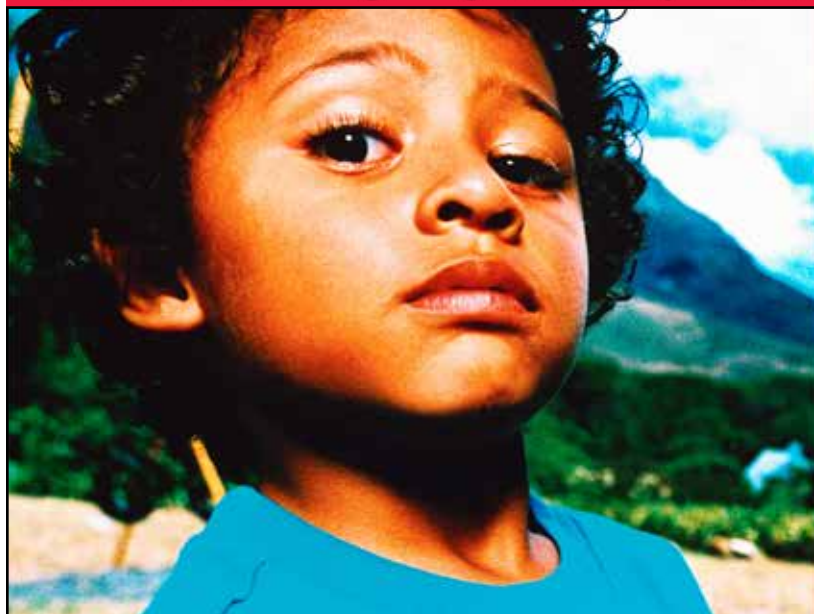
your mailbox. My bank account's loss is freedom's gain! In the time-honored fight for life, liberty and the pursuit of *Individual Decorating Preferences*, I stand unbowed and more determined than ever!

And around midnight tonight—if you listen closely—you just might hear me exclaim as I drive out of sight; MERRY 4th of July to all and to all... TWINKLE LIGHTS!!!

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

LisaCLove@bellsouth.net

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In memo section write: TEAM Peru
Mail to: 4855 Kimball Bridge Road,
Alpharetta, GA 30005

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www.conduitsforchrist.wordpress.com

The Summitt of Friendship

by Suzanne Allen

I vividly remember the first time I met Pat, and—if you'll excuse the cliché—although it was over forty years ago, it seems like only yesterday.

She was a tall girl with her hair pulled up on top of her head, wearing cut-off jeans and pumping gas at a little gas station/country store. It was a hot, summer afternoon and we were right in the middle of Henrietta, Tennessee, a wide spot in the little road that ran between Clarksville and Ashland City on the way to Nashville.

I was seventeen years old, and only a few months out of high school in Nashville, and I had registered to attend college at Samford University in Birmingham. Not long before I was to leave for school, my mom informed me that Birmingham was too far away for me to come home until Thanksgiving. Reality set in—I loved home and I loved Tennessee, so I realized that maybe there were other schools besides Samford. Some of my high school friends had picked the University of Tennessee at Martin, so I decided to check it out.

I had a cousin in Clarksville, about 50 miles northeast of Nashville, and she was thrilled that I was considering UT Martin. She had friends there and she wanted

to drive me over to meet one—in Henrietta. When we got out of the car, the tall girl smiled, brushed the hair out her eyes and said, “Hi, how y’all doin?”

That was my introduction to Pat Head. My cousin told her that I was an athlete and that I was headed to

Martin. She seemed pleased, and the three of us sat around the store and talked between fill-ups. Pat was a year older than me and would be returning as a sophomore. I knew immediately that I liked her, but what I didn’t know at the time was that this country girl from Henrietta, Tennessee would go

I probably would’ve been her little sister. As an athlete, I was very competitive, but Pat’s sorority usually won all the athletic events. Consequently, I found myself spending more time with her and her sorority than with my own sorority sisters, and I eventually moved across the hall from Pat in the dorm.

In addition to playing for UTM’s women’s basketball team, Pat also played for their women’s volleyball team. In fact, she talked me into trying out for the team, and I made it. This

was in the early 1970s, and at that time, women’s volleyball was not as sophisticated a sport as it is today. I recently found a picture of the team from 1972. Pat was number 55, and I was number 15. We were so young!

We had to raise the money to travel to our away games by having bake sales, car washes and any other way we could think of to get funds. We traveled in an old university van, which didn’t even have seats for everyone.

I remember one away game in particular—it was against one of our rivals, Murray State University, just over the state line in Kentucky. Pat and I had double dated with two fraternity guys the night before, and I suppose we had partied maybe a little too much. So, we were a little late showing up at the van. When we arrived, our coach

was waiting on us, arms crossed, and since the van was already full, we had to ride on the floor in the back. By the time we got to Murray State, we were not exactly feeling in top shape. It was a long ride up and a long ride home. To make matters worse, we lost the volleyball match. We learned that some



I recently found a picture of the team from 1972. Pat was number 55, and I was number 15. We were so young!

on to be one of the most famous and winningest college basketball coaches in history.

Once I got to UT Martin, my high school friends talked me into “going Greek” and rushing a sorority. Pat belonged to a rival sorority, and I later learned that had I rushed her sorority,

lessons are harder and more painful than others.

But Pat was quite the basketball player. During one home game with our in-state rival, Austin Peay State University, her mom and dad drove up from Henrietta to Martin to see her play. Towards halftime, Pat went down with an injured knee. She came out early from halftime to shoot around, but it was obvious that her knee hurt too much for her to finish the game. After the game, I advised her parents to take her to Nashville to be seen by “Pinky” Lipscomb, who was the doctor who handled most athletic injuries in Nashville at the time. Her parents initially took her to a doctor in Clarksville, who told them the same thing. Mr. Head said, “That’s what that little girl told us.” From then on, I was “that little girl” to Mr. Head.

Pat had her surgery for a torn ACL, and when she returned to school, she had to rehabilitate that knee. Her rehab consisted of two tube socks tied together with weights in them. She would sit on a bedside table in our dorm room and lift those weights daily. There were tears in her eyes as she struggled to lift her weighed-down leg the first couple of times. However, with determination and strength, she persevered and eventually she increased the weights and kept on going. In fact, she got her knee in shape in time to make the U.S. Women’s National Basketball Team. She was able to play in the 1976 Olympics in Montreal (the first year for women’s basketball), and they took home a silver medal. Although today, surgeons only need to poke little holes for the procedure, she would carry a huge scar on her leg from the injury in that game.

Pat graduated from UT Martin when I was just a junior. Upon graduating, she was offered a Graduate Assistantship at UT Knoxville. My parents agreed to let me transfer, so I went with Pat to Knoxville, and we found an off-campus apartment to share. We were quite a sight, rolling into town—we had no money and very little furniture.

We visited a downtown Knoxville discount furniture store, and we found a black vinyl couch. They only wanted \$200 for it, but Pat insisted on haggling with them. Feigning desperation, the salesman sold us the couch for \$150. We were pretty proud of ourselves for getting a good deal, until once we got it home and the sofa’s springs broke. We fixed it, but laughed at what a “deal” we’d gotten. That old sofa was terribly uncomfortable, but we thought it looked so good!

We never had to worry about food, because Pat’s mom always sent us wonderful “care packages” with homemade sausages and jellies and all kinds of meat. Pat and I arrived at an understanding—she cooked and I cleaned.

My parents agreed to let me transfer, so I went with Pat to Knoxville, and we found an off-campus apartment to share.

We always had people over to eat, and I ended up staying in the kitchen, cleaning up. One day I decided I was tired of cleaning up, so I made spaghetti and, to the surprise of both of us—it was actually good! From then on, we split the kitchen duties, except Pat knew how to use a pressure cooker and, of course, her cooking was better than mine at that time. However, looking back, I’ve come to realize that I really learned to cook by watching her.

Upon her arrival in Knoxville, Pat was surprised to learn that the former coach had decided to take a sabbatical, so she wouldn’t be the graduate assistant, but rather, the head coach of the women’s basketball team. This was after having graduated herself only a few months before.

If I ever had any ideas about playing for her, Pat quickly dispelled them. After I saw how hard she worked her players, I realized that she had actually done me a favor in not letting her roommate try out for the team.

The only girls I knew on campus at that time were her basketball players. I went out with them one night and we all got home rather late. Needless to

say, she knew who I had been with and also knew we’d probably been imbibing that night. The next day in practice, she put four trashcans in the corners of the gym and ran the girls until they threw up. Lesson learned—I never went out with them again. Her players were always amazed at the things she knew about them—they used to say she had eyes all over the campus!

Since I was not playing, I kept the books for the games and did whatever Pat needed me to do. On road trips, I washed uniforms and drove one of the university station wagons to the away games. I recall one particular game with Tennessee Tech, which was our major rival at the time. Pat had asked every person on campus to attend, and

we managed to get a hundred or so in the old alumni gym. In those days, that was a pretty good attendance number for one of our games. This, in fact, foreshadowed Pat’s ability to “put fans in the seats.” She was to become incredibly

instrumental at raising the awareness and popularity of women’s basketball.

The game with Tech was close, and I was keeping the books. One of their better players fouled out, and Tech’s coach accused me of cheating, stating her player only had four, not five, fouls. I knew I was right, and I refused to back down, and the foul stood. Pat knew that I was very ethical and took that job seriously, and she was proud of me for standing my ground. We went on to win that game by only a few points, and it stands out in my memory, to this day.

That first year of her coaching was packed with highs and lows—Pat relived every loss and I relived them with her. After a loss, she would always want to fall asleep to Linda Ronstadt’s “Silver Threads and Golden Needles” playing on our old record player. It’s amazing to me how when that song comes up on my iPod or on the oldies station on my car radio, it spins me back in time to those bitter-sweet nights.

In 2003, Pat (by then, she was Pat Head Summitt) was inducted into the Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame. I was

working for BellSouth, and I attended that night and sat at the BellSouth table. Also at the table were Lisa Patton and Ann Holt, two Middle Tennessee TV personalities. Ann's husband, Kenny Blackburn (with whom I worked at BellSouth), told them I had been Pat's roommate. I saw Pat's parents, who were sitting a few tables over, and I asked Lisa and Ann if they would like to meet them. We went to the Heads' table, and Ms. Hazel (Pat's Mom) was so excited to meet them. Afterwards, I told Pat that even though she was one of the most famous coaches in the world, her mom was more excited to meet local TV stars Lisa and Ann! I still laugh about that.

Obviously, Pat's career has come a long way since those early days. She holds the record for the most wins for an NCAA basketball coach—men's or women's team in any division. She coached 38 years, from that rocky (top) first season, 1974, until 2012, always with her beloved Lady Vols. She

was the first NCAA coach (and one of only four college coaches overall) to achieve at least a thousand wins. She was named the Naismith Basketball Coach of the Century in April, 2000 and in 2009, the Sporting News placed her at number 11 on its list of the 50 Greatest Coaches of All Time in all sports. Then in 2012, Pat was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Pat was named the Naismith Basketball Coach of the Century in April, 2000 and in 2009, the Sporting News placed her at number 11 on its list of the 50 Greatest Coaches of All Time.

Just as there were the highs and lows of that first season all those years ago, along with all of the brilliance of Pat's success came the 2011 diagnosis that she had early-onset Alzheimer's disease. She stepped down from the head coaching job in 2012, but stayed on with Tennessee as head coach emeritus of the Lady Vols. She has been an inspiration to so many, and even with her health issues, she is still

contributing to the betterment of lives and helping to champion the awareness of Alzheimer's disease.

I'm in no way surprised at either her success or her strength and perseverance in dealing with her health issues. She's one of the truest, most fun-loving, and yet, driven people I have ever met. I pray for her every day, and I'm happy to be able to watch as her legacy continues through her son, Tyler, as he began his own career as head coach of the Louisiana Tech University's Lady Techsters women's basketball team.

Most of all, though, it has been one of the greatest blessings of this little girl to know and to be a friend of that tall, gas-pumping country girl in cut-offs from Henrietta, Tennessee; I will always cherish those roller-coaster early years and value the impact she has had on my life.

Suzanne Allen recently retired from AT&T and is a life-long Vols fan and resident of Nashville.



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Magnolia Blossom

by Patricia Neely-Dorsey

She is a delicate flower
Dressed in white, like a blushing bride
Open wide with possibility,
She is the epitome
Of southern charm
And grace.
Her admirers stand in awe,
Of such a perfect creation.
Her fragrance is intoxicating
Her beauty...
Timeless.

*Patricia Neely-Dorsey is a Tupelo native who prides herself
on being a "Goodwill Ambassador" for Mississippi.*



The Truth About the Lye

by Billie Martin Dean Buckles

W

ith a new baby in the family, laundry had to be done frequently. Birdseye brand diapers were about 27 inches square. Depending upon the sex of the baby, the diapers were folded in a fashion so that the thickest part was where it was needed.

Babies go through a lot of diapers, gowns and towels. Mother never had enough diapers to last more than a couple of days, and there were always diapers on the line or soaking in a tub of water.

On wash day, Daddy would draw water from the well that was located a short distance from the house and fill the large black kettle that was used to heat water out of doors. The well

was hand dug and was several feet in diameter. The inside was lined with large rocks brought in a wagon from a nearby hillside. These were extended to three feet or so on top of the ground and a wooden lid covered the top to keep animals from falling into the well where they might drown and contaminate the water. When this occurred all the water had to be drawn out of the well, sometimes more than once, until

enough fresh water flowed into the well so that it was again usable. The water was drawn from the well with a two-gallon water bucket that was attached to a rope and connected to a pulley. The water table in southern Oklahoma is quite close to the top of the ground, and most wells were only about twenty feet deep. Drawing water for the multitude of household uses was a chore shared by everyone strong enough to carry it into the house.

When the kettle was filled a fire was started underneath to heat the water. While the wash water was heating, Mother would shave some of her homemade lye soap into the pot to

start melting. She would then add the white or light colored clothing so that they would be easier to finish washing on the wash board. A short bench sat next to the house and it held two galvanized wash tubs. One was filled with cold water for rinsing and the other was filled with the hot water and clothing. Mother kept a piece of broomstick handy to fish items of clothing from the pot and move them to the other tub. Next, each piece was scrubbed up and down across the wash board to remove all of the dirt and grime. After rinsing and wringing out every item, the clean laundry was hung on the clothesline to dry. This was time consuming and tedious work. The baby had to be tended during all of this routine, and an energetic little boy needed frequent attention.

Water that was hand drawn from the well was not wasted. After the washing was done the soapy water was used to scrub the floors. The living room was mopped first, and then the kitchen, and finally the front porch which was an important room of any farm home. When anyone came to visit or inquire about something it was necessary to cross the porch to reach the front door. The strong lye soap that Mother added to the wash water cleaned the wood floors and made our house smell fresh and clean on washday.

Lye is a strong alkaline solution that is rich in potassium carbonate. It is leached from wood ashes and is used especially for making soap. It is very caustic, therefore, should be kept out of reach of children. Perhaps my earliest memory involves an incident when Mother was doing the wash. I was a toddler, about eighteen months old, and we had moved to a house that had a front porch. In order to keep an eye on me and make sure that I did not get close to the open fire, she had left me there to play. Although Mother was always very attentive and careful, she made one big mistake. She often added a teaspoon of lye to the first wash water to help remove stains from

the clothing. After swishing the spoon back and forth in the kettle, she set the can of lye that was tightly sealed, and the teaspoon on the edge of the porch. While I was playing I noticed the spoon, picked it up and put it in my mouth.

The instant Mother heard my screams she immediately knew something terrible had happened. She picked me up and I can still remember her running with me in her arms. The ground was rough and I was jostling up and down and somewhere behind us the screams kept coming. She came

The instant Mother heard my screams, she immediately knew something terrible had happened.

to a barbed wire fence, quickly pushed me underneath and then crawled after me. Mother knew that Aunt Esther would know how to treat this kind of injury. When mixed with liquid, such as water or saliva, lye immediately starts destroying the flesh or whatever it touches.

Aunt Esther had mother put beaten egg whites in my mouth and ever so gradually my screams became little sobs. From a distant place in my mind I recall that I'm in my mother's arms and she is holding me close, her gentle warmth comforts me. A small scar in the center of my tongue has been an ever present reminder of this event.

To my knowledge, we never had a decent clothesline. Ours was usually attached to a pole in the corner of the yard and stretched to a corner of the chicken house to hold it up. On sunny days the clothes would wave and flap in the wind and would soon be dry, fresh and sweet-smelling. In freezing weather the clothes would be hung out briefly, and they would instantly freeze. After they were taken off the line, or gathered in, they would be hung about the house to finish drying. As one might imagine, the laundry being such a labor intensive activity, clothes didn't get tossed into the dirty clothes basket

until they were really dirty. On nights when we did not bathe, Mother insisted we wash our feet before getting into bed. Sheets were changed only once a week, so clean sheets were special and we looked forward to them as we got ready for bed. Once in bed, oh, how pleasant! The sheets were crisp, even a bit stiff, as there was no dryer to beat them into softness. They went straight from the clothesline to our beds, and they still carried the wonderful smells of sunshine and fresh air. Surely nothing can duplicate the fragrance of sun-dried sheets.

My Mother's first washing machine was a Maytag. It had a gasoline engine which had to be started with a foot pedal. My brother, Donald, perfected his mechanical skills working on the engine when it

proved difficult, if not impossible to start. After the water and clothes were transferred from the big, black pot to the tub of the washer the machine was turned on and allowed to agitate. A few minutes later Mother would fish them out, piece by piece, with a short piece of broom stick. She lifted each piece up to the wringer and ran it through into the galvanized washtub that held the rinse water. She poured a small amount of bluing into the rinse water to "brighten up the whites." Bluing was a handy compound; we sometimes applied it to wasp stings. After rinsing, the clothes were again put through the wringer, this time into a container waiting beneath. The clothes were now ready to hang on the clothesline to dry.

After the laundry was washed and dried, next came the ironing. Mother used flat irons that were heated on the woodstove until 1948 when REA finally brought electricity to the rural areas of southern Oklahoma. These old heavy irons had been her mother's and had handles attached which were also made of iron. A pot holder was used to hold the iron when in use because the handle got almost as hot as the iron. Later, irons were made that had a single wooden handle that latched

into place on top. The wooden handles did not get hot, and they were more comfortable to use, but Mother used the old sadirons that had belonged to Grandmother Hartwick.

Mother's ironing board was a wide piece of lumber shaped like an ironing board, but without legs. The wide end of the board, which she had covered with several layers of old sheet blankets, was placed on the sewing machine, and the tapered end extended across the top of a chair. She ironed with one foot on the rung of the chair to make sure it did not tip over.

We didn't always have a lot of clothes, and usually wore them more than once before laundering, but everything was always ironed to perfection. She always ironed our pillowcases and pretty embroidered scarves that we placed on dressers and chests, as well as the clothes we wore.

Before ironing most of the clothes were dipped in Faultless starch. This was a powder mixed with water and heated on the stove until it was the

right consistency. Starch added a slick coating to the fabric making ironing somewhat easier, and clothing that was starched did not absorb dirt or grime as easily. Clothes were dried, and then they were sprinkled with water and rolled to fit into a basket. After sitting for an hour or so they were ready to iron. Sometimes it

ciently hot to place it on the piece of clothing to be ironed, but not too hot so that it would scorch the fabric.

Looking back on those days now through the lens of time and perspective, I am amazed at how our daily routines have been changed so much by today's technology and just how hard it was back then—even if we didn't think of it as being hard; it was just the way things were. In those days, even something as simple as doing laundry was a serious chore. And, the memory of the accident with the lye is just one reminder of how our very lives could change in a single instant.

It is easy to understand why Mother purchased a new electric iron when we learned we were moving into a house that had electricity.

would take a couple of afternoons to get the week's ironing done.

It is easy to understand why Mother purchased a new electric iron when we learned we were moving into a house that had electricity. It is difficult to imagine the tedious job of ironing with sadirons. Keeping them at the correct temperature would have been no small task. I recall how she would put a bit of spit on her finger and quickly dab it onto the iron to see if it sizzled just right. This meant the iron was suffi-

Billie Martin Dean Buckles is an Oklahoma writer who enjoyed a 24-year career in banking and finance. Her book about growing up during the Depression is called "Changing Seasons" and is available through Tate Publishing. This story is an excerpt from "Laundry and Lye Soap," a chapter from her book. Used by permission from the author & publisher. ©2015 Billie Martin Dean Buckles. All rights reserved.



Changing Seasons

Real-life stories of a woman who did not dwell in a utopian world of golden spoons and signature clothes. Billie Martin Dean Buckles began to grasp maturity in the southern part of Oklahoma during the 1950s. Her book, *Changing Seasons* tells how, with her modest, responsible and hardworking parents, she was able to become a successful businesswoman.

www.billiebuckles.tateauthor.com

Billie Martin Dean Buckles



A Very Bad Hair Day

by Laura Kathleen Megahee

A few Sundays ago I washed my hair and was trying to figure out how I was going to style it. Must be age or something because I have lost some hair and it no longer holds curl.

I remembered I had a small curling brush and decided it would be perfect to style my hair. WRONG!

I wrapped a small section of hair around the brush and rolled it inward to dry it. After a few seconds of drying, I tried to unroll the hair off my brush. One problem—the hair was not coming off. It was at most a half inch from my scalp and I could not get this brush out of my hair!

After TWO hours I had gotten about half the hair untangled from the brush but the rest would not budge. What was I going to do? I couldn't cut the brush out. I had already texted two friends and got no response from either.

I sat down on the bathroom floor and had a little talk with God. Something like, "Really, God? It has been a really tough year, could you please just untangle my hair?" Right after that, a thought popped into my head. There's a Great Clips right around the

corner—but that meant I had to drive with the stupid brush in my hair. Then I would have to walk from the parking lot to the shop. I ran to my closet and grabbed a cap. Not happening—didn't come close to covering the brush. Ok—what about a scarf? I grabbed my favorite scarf and quickly found I would have to wrap my entire head, including my face, to cover the brush.

After a brief cry, I admitted to myself that I would have to drive to the shop with the PINK brush hanging in my hair. I would just have to hold my hand up and try to hide the brush. After all, I am an intelligent woman—I only needed one hand to drive. I made it to the shop without many stares.

I drove into the parking lot and parked as close to the Great Clips as I could. Okay—coast was clear—ready, set, go-o-o-o! I jumped out of the car and sprinted toward the door.

Just as I got about 15 feet from the

door, a very handsome man was on his way out. I was mortified.

Fortunately this was a compassionate man. Not only did he say "bless your heart," he also held the door open for me. Did his words diminish the embarrassment—not a chance.

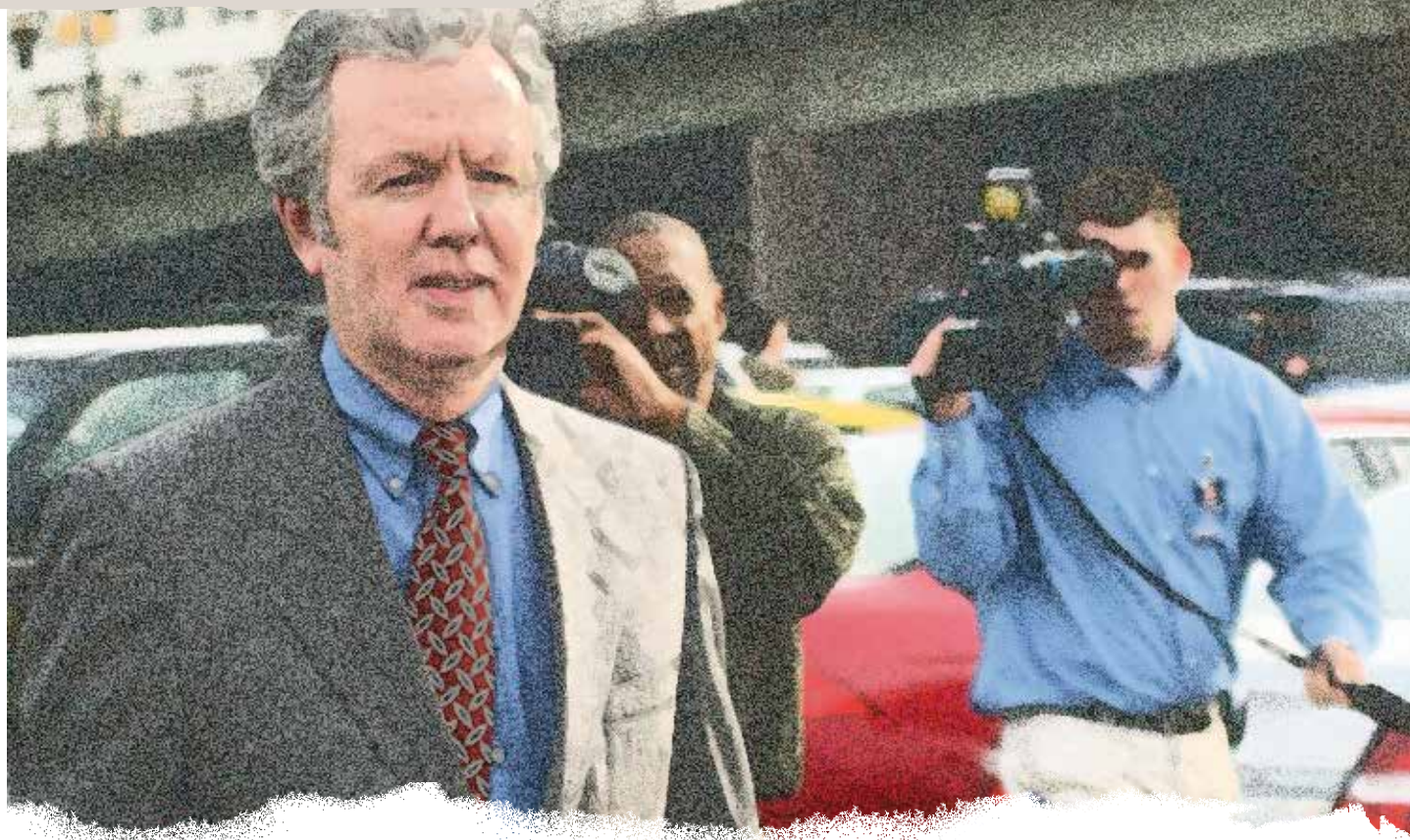
I blew in through the door (fortunately there were no other customers) and yelled "HELP!"

Natalie came to my rescue. She doused my hair with conditioner and after about 20 minutes, finally set me free. I promptly told her to throw the brush away.

I asked her how much I owed her. Natalie said, "We don't have a price for detangling, how about a shampoo? It's only \$6.00." I got the shampoo, I bought a new brush and tipped Natalie handsomely.

I had another short conversation with God as I drove home—thank you, thank you, thank you.

Laura Kathleen Megahee is a writer from Sugar Hill, Georgia.



Merle Temple and The Great Commission

by Lisa Love

No one is more surprised by the success of Merle Temple's first book than Merle, himself. The book, "A Ghostly Shade of Pale," started out as fictionalized vignettes of Temple's experiences as the first captain in the Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics in the turbulent and drug-drenched seventies.

The response to the book has been amazing. A woman sends Merle a private message on Facebook. "Do you know that we pray for you?" she asks. "My son was trying to climb out of a deep valley of drug abuse. Your book was the first book he read when he was scaling that mountain. He called me every night to tell me what was happening in the book. You don't know what your book meant to him. You don't know what a hero you are to him."

Another woman, an avid reader whose cancer has returned, tells her family that she wants to "meet" Michael

Parker—*Michael Parker* is the central character in "A Ghostly Shade of Pale" and its sequel, "A Rented World." The woman's family calls Merle. He goes to the hospital to pray with her; she leaves this world with both books in her bed.

A soldier posts a picture of his preparation for deployment overseas. The picture features all of what he calls his "essentials" for the front lines—his equipment, his helmet, his camouflage uniform...and Merle's two books.

Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Adrian Rogers' old 30,000 member church, sends word that both

"Ghostly Shade" and "Rented World" are favorites in their library. A small church tells him that their waiting list to read his books are so long that it will take a year for all the members to read them.

Even though he is surprised by all the attention his books have received, Merle takes it all in stride—*these are the gifts that keep him writing and on the road*. His books are his ministry, his "little corner of the Great Commission," he says.

Merle and his wife Judy travel the country to speak and sign books. A number of schools (including middle schools, high schools and colleges) are using his books. He has spoken to 1500 students in two months of travels, offering them tips on writing, harrowing tales of yesteryear, but more importantly, his Christian faith.

He has sung songs with Morgan Freeman, met with movie produc-

ers, and signed books for the cast of "Criminal Minds" in Hollywood, but it's those treasured moments with students and private talks with his heroes of the faith—like Christian apologist, Ravi Zacharias—that are the memories he relives over and over again.

Some felt it would be hard to follow his first book, "A Ghostly Shade of Pale" (Barnes and Noble's all-time bestselling novel in North Mississippi), but "A Rented World" has garnered impressive reviews from critics and readers alike. His central character, Michael Parker, continues his journey to what some might call "divine destiny," where God shows him who and what never mattered and Who always will.

"Criminal Minds" writer Jim Clemente was asked about Merle's faith and how important it is to him.

"Merle believes that it saved him many times," Clemente replied, "and I tend to believe that he is right. Others who faced what he has would be six feet under." Clemente said he gets many requests to read manuscripts and most do not hold up, but he contacted Merle and told him, "Come to Hollywood. I want to represent you." The two men have become close friends, and Clemente is pitching Temple's books for a TV series. "Merle is a great author and a better man," Clemente said.

Clemente loved "A Ghostly Shade of Pale" and endorsed "A Rented World"; it's easy to see why. It is a candid baring of the soul of a writer, with powerful imagery that unleashes a river of tears and tugs and rips at the full range of emotions. Readers can feel his pain and shudder at the danger and evil that surrounds his hero. Merle's descriptive writing and command of the English language draws the reader into his world and takes them with him to the edge of the precipice and to many a point of no return. As one reader wrote, "I didn't just read this book—I felt like I lived it."

"A Rented World" will break your heart. It will make you angry at those

who live within what he labels the "unholy trinity of crime, politics, and business"—men he says who have decided to "rule in hell on earth, rather than to serve eternally in heaven." The book grabs you by the throat with high-definition emotions that bleed from every tear-stained page. He wants you to know that there is danger and darkness in the world, often disguised as light, and it waits to seduce you and to steal your soul. "Vanity, vanity," the pages preach, "All is vanity." He is a man on a mission.

Literary gems are sprinkled throughout "A Rented World," which is spell-binding and haunting. The ending will squeeze tears from even the hardest of

his ability to bare his heart and soul in such a tender, genuine way leaves no one unaffected.

He captivated us late into the evening with tales of his and Judy's travels and book signings, but as our time together drew to a close, I asked him a question that left Merle at a loss for words. Just as Michael Parker had been falsely accused and wrongly imprisoned, so had he. I wanted to know if, through the injustice of it all, the mental and physical abuse he'd been forced to endure, were there moments of light in the dark abyss of prison that crystallized in his heart that God had not forsaken him? He teared up and asked me if he could go home, think about it and get back to me.

The next morning, I got this email from Merle: "Lisa, I gave your question much thought last night. So many memories, so many tears. When I entered my first prison, the Lord showed me that I should start

a Christian movie ministry. Against all odds and in spite of those who said it wouldn't be allowed, we began the ministry at my first institution in Edgefield, SC and took it to two more facilities in Tennessee and Alabama. Thousands of men were exposed to the Gospel of Christ via those movies. Those 200 or so movies are still there, and the work continues, long after I left the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

"At Edgefield, the new ministry became the highlight of the week for men who had little to do. There was standing room only in the chapel each week, and there in the dark, I would hear big, tough men began to weep as their hearts were softened to the approach of the Holy Spirit.

"One man kept resisting my invitations. He said he was about to lose custody of his children and was surrounded by troubles. He said there seemed to be no way out, and he needed to think. He was very angry and stressed. He finally gave in one day after I invited him to see 'The Perfect Stranger,' a movie that had been released just before I entered prison. He said, 'I'll

He has sung songs with Morgan Freeman, and signed books for the cast of "Criminal Minds," but it's those treasured moments with students that are the memories he relives over and over again.

hearts but it also invites you to meet the "Hound of Heaven" Who is always pursuing the flawed hero in the novel. The *North Mississippi Daily Journal* describes the hero's journey to the bottom as "face down, no direction but up—no way out but the Cross."

Temple spends long hours in signings, wanting to engage every reader. He strives to reach his audiences, in venues both large and small, with his use of words to uplift and edify and his message of hope and redemption.

That love and respect is often returned. After an emotional speech to a group in tiny, Eutaw, Alabama, the attendees went on Facebook to say, "Eutaw, Alabama loves Merle Temple. The hand of God is on him."

Truly it is. Truly.

It was my honor to sit with Merle, Judy and a few close friends pool-side on an unusually cool, breezy May night, surrounded by moonlight and the sounds of nature. Whether he's putting pen to page, speaking to a crowd or sharing with friends, Merle entices and enchants us with his God-given gift for storytelling; but more than that,

Southern Writers

come if you'll just shut up and get off my back.'

"That night we had another packed house in the chapel, and men were softly crying at the tenderness of the story of the woman who confronts her doubts and finds what she had always been seeking in the man who invited her to dinner. He answered all of her questions at that dinner and all of the questions of the men watching the movie that night in prison.

"I walked up the hill to the dorm, and sat alone in my room as I prayed. 'Thank you, Lord, for another good night, but Lord, why am I still here? Why am I still here?'

"At that moment, with my head

bowed, I heard someone clearing their throat. I looked up to see the man I had hounded to attend the movie. He was standing at my door, but he was

way out of my troubles, but tonight, in the dark, listening to the words of Jesus, I knew just what He wanted me to do. Thank you, Merle. Thank you, Merle, for staying after me.'

"When he left, I just looked up to Heaven and said, 'Thank you, Lord.' I knew He had sent me the answer to my prayer, to why I was still there. It was one of many answers to prayers that He sent through desperate people in those 2,000 nights in prison.

"Bless you Lisa for asking that question. Merle"

And THAT is

just another example of Merle Temple baring his heart and soul for God's glory and His Great Commission.

www.merletemple.com

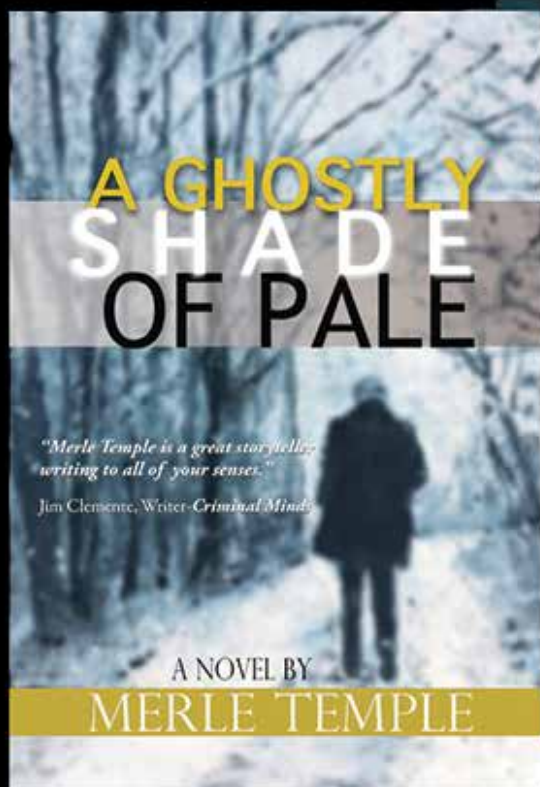
Excerpt from "A Rented World"

"He had spent years seeking some elusive simplicity, even as he constructed his own complex and artificial existence—one that revolved around Michael Parker. But here, in this womb of brokenness, the Light invaded the dungeon of his ego and called him out of himself. Divine love washed over Michael's world, and he understood for the first time that something more was at stake than his own life and liberty—something tumultuous, essential, and eternal.

He removed his government slippers and fell to his knees. This was a house of horrors and deprivation, but he knew he was now on—holy ground. The Hound of Heaven had not given up on him."

not scowling as before. He was smiling from ear-to-ear, and there was the Light all around his face.

"Oh, Merle,' he said. 'That movie, that movie! I thought there was no



Buy the Book...

The divergent elements of a Southern Gothic nightmare converge and occupy the same stage in "A Ghostly Shade of Pale" where all the history files on a bygone era are ripped open and rewritten. The violent and dark conflicts of a Mississippi in transition in the 1970s unfold as the players find themselves trapped in games of murder, betrayal, the macabre, and the supernatural. Michael Parker comes of age as the tranquility of the old South is shattered by the Vietnam War, civil unrest, assassinations, political corruption, and a wave of drug abuse that brings the first war on drugs to his front door.

amazonkindle nook



Time Enough

by K.M. Megahee

The Kimmer Group, LLC

It's About Time

by David Ray Skinner

One day in 1985, Churchie Tyler and Merrie McAllister meet and, later that day, a corporate executive is murdered in his office. These unrelated events set the stage for the events that follow in K.M. Megahee's action-packed thriller, "Time Enough."

Set primarily in Atlanta and bouncing back and forth between 1985 and 2035, the book takes the reader on a wild ride that skirts the past and the future and coats it with a southern flavor.

Here's the gist of it: the son of the

victim of the unsolved 1985 murder has grown up to become a success-

The son of the victim of the unsolved 1985 murder has grown up to become a successful and very influential U.S. Senator.

ful and very influential U.S. Senator. As a member of the committee to

oversee the Historical Event Research Organization (HERO), he pressures the organization to assign an officer to travel back in time to that fateful day to bring back the story of what really happened and who murdered his corporate executive father.

Everything proceeds according to plan until the assigned officer, Army Ranger Captain Marc McKnight accidentally interacts with the beautiful, smart and full-of-life Merrie McAllister in 1985, preventing her from meeting her future

Southern Books

husband. This alters history and affects the descendants of the Tyler family, including McKnight's teammate Winston Tyler III. Now, McKnight must repair the damage he caused and complete the original mission. Despite his efforts, he runs into Merrie again, cre-

Megahee is a skillful writer (and frequent contributor to *SouthernReader*), and, establishing hard and fast rules and parameters for the process, he actually helps the reader believe in the exciting plausibility of time travel.

Once you accept that possibility, you find yourself rooting for the hero

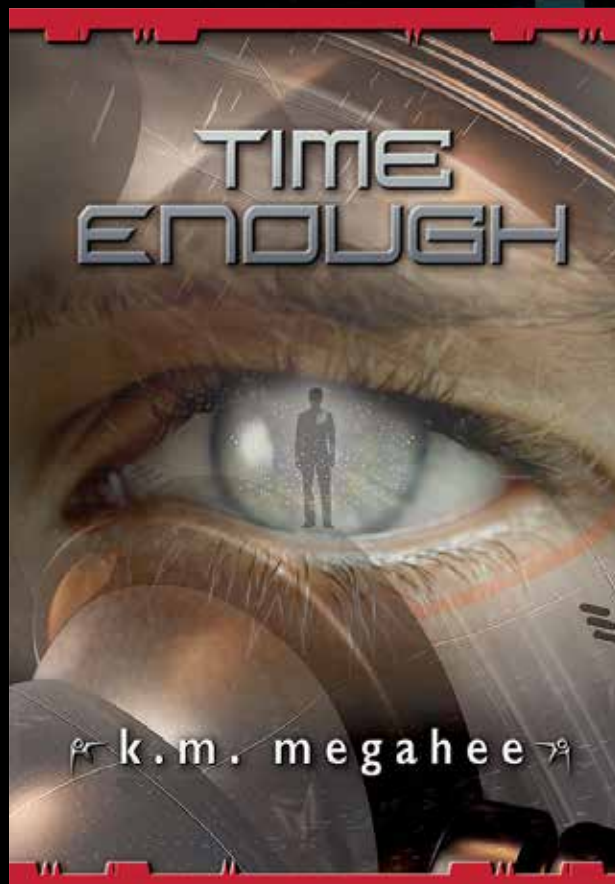
Megahee is a skillful writer and, establishing hard and fast rules and parameters for the process, he actually helps the reader believe in the exciting plausibility of time travel.

ating more wrinkles in history. Even worse, McKnight knows that she is one woman he cannot have.

The plot ping-pongs between an unrequited love story, science fiction/murder mystery, and a paean to the city of Atlanta—past and future.

and agonizing over the life-and-death and past-present-future decisions he has to make regarding his lost-in-time potential soulmate.

For information on ordering "Time Enough," check out Megahee's website: www.kimmegahee.com.



Take the 'Time' to read this book!

In "Time Enough," K.M. Megahee takes the reader on a literary excursion that blends science fiction with an old fashioned love story, and keeps them guessing as to not only what's behind the next door, but also what's going to be revealed in the next decade.

For more information or to order the book, visit
www.kimmegahee.com

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Time Enough

by K.M. Megahee

The Kimmer Group, LLC

A 'Timely' Excerpt

7:34 PM—March 21st, 2000—Physics Office Building—
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Robby Astalos was celebrating. He poured a shot from the bottle of Jack Daniels he had saved for this occasion, the first day in his office and lab as a full professor.

He loosened his tie, sat and put his feet up on the desk. Smiling at the memory of the ceremony tonight, he took a sip. *What was it Dean Alexander said? Oh, yeah.* "Youngest full professor in MIT history at twenty years of age."

Damn straight. Robby intended to make more history in this job, especially as a researcher in energy and physics.

His eyes took in the room; the packing boxes, the lab table, and finally resting on the newly unpacked objects on the desk. My desk. He smirked and picked up the fist-sized model of the Starship Enterprise. He turned it over in his hands, examining it again as if he were looking at it for the first time. *Light speed travel.*

This office and this lab is where it'll be developed. Raising his shot glass, he saluted the room. He took another sip, pulled his tie off and tossed it on the desk.

Robby was convinced he was on the verge of a breakthrough. The warp drive still existed only in his mind, but the ideas were starting to come together in new, exciting ways. He grinned again and downed the rest of his drink.

Okay. One more shot and get to work. He filled the glass, tossed it down, and slipped the bottle back into his desk drawer. As he set the glass down, he felt the hair on his arm

stand up. *What the—?* To confirm his suspicion, he reached over to touch the metal desk lamp. As he expected, a spark of static electricity leapt from his fingertips.

Glimpsing something out of the corner of his eye, he spun to face the lab area. A globe of white light had appeared. At first, it seemed solid; then he realized it was transparent and the air inside was glowing and swirling around, as if in a windstorm. Static electricity crackled through the room.

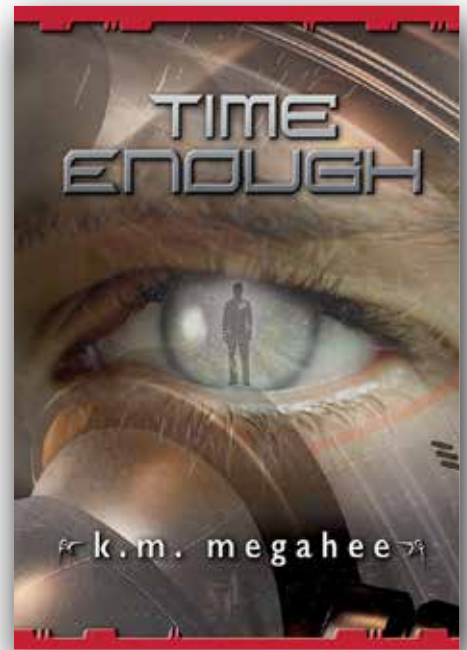
He sat up so quickly, he nearly fell

**"No trick. I'm you from the future.
Twenty-five years in the future,
in fact. It's nice to meet you."
He stuck out his hand.**

from his chair. *Is that a man?* After a moment, he was sure he saw a figure in the middle of the globe.

He stood and gripped the edge of the desk. What's happening? He thought of the Star Trek transporter, but dismissed the thought with a shake of his head. Impossible.

Just as the light became too bright to watch, it bulged out to nearly double its previous size and went out. The man from the globe fell backward, crashing into the desks behind the lab table. "Crap," he said, then laughed. "Well, he told me, didn't he?" Robby stared as the man picked himself up



from the floor and began dusting himself off. When the man noticed him, he said, "Damn, this place is a mess. Don't you ever clean it up?"

"I just moved in," Robby said. "What just happened? Who the hell are you?"

The man rolled his eyes, grinned at Robby and held his hands up, framing his face. "Don't you recognize me? You should."

Robby gaped at him. He did look familiar. "Uh, I..." His mind raced. Where did he know this guy from? He was older than Robby. Forty? Fifty, maybe?

"Look closer," the man said, grinning wider and stepping toward him.

Recognition dawned. "No way. No freaking way."

The man laughed aloud. "Oh, yes, there is a way. Remember that scar on your elbow from falling out of that tree at Grandpa's?" He unbuttoned the sleeve on his left arm. Without thinking, Robby reached for his own elbow and felt for the raised scar.

The man exposed his left elbow. "Still got it," he said, as he pointed it out with his right hand. "Believe it. I'm you."

"I don't believe it. This is some sort

Southern Books

of trick." Wary now, Robby began to back away.

The man stepped forward with his hands forward, palms up. "No trick. I'm you from the future. Twenty-five years in the future, in fact. I go by Rob now, instead of Robby. It's nice to meet you." He stuck out his hand.

Robby recoiled from the extended hand, shaking his head. "No. This is a joke. There's a camera here somewhere. Punk the new prof, right?

Okay, you guys. You can come out now," he called, a touch of panic creeping into his voice.

The man leaned back against the lab table and crossed his arms. "He told me you would freak out, just like I did."

"What?" Robby mumbled. "Who?"

"Robert. He should be here any moment now."

Looking the man up and down, Robby paused for a moment, leered at the man, then squared off and crossed his arms. "Seriously. Who are you?

How do you know so much about me?"

"You really are having trouble with this, aren't you? One more time. I'm you. Or rather, you, twenty-five years from now. You did it, you know. Nobody else could figure it out, but you did. Well, actually, you didn't do it.

"No. This is a joke. There's a camera here somewhere. Punk the new prof, right? Okay, you guys. You can come out now," he called.

No warp drive yet—but you stumbled onto something really exciting."

This guy is pissing me off. Robby clenched his fists and leaned forward. "What? Tell me."

"I think I'll let Robert explain. He started it. He came back first accidentally, you know, and now we've come back for your help." He uncrossed his arms and turned around. "Come to think of it, he should be here by now. Oh, there he is."

Another globe of light had appeared. The light grew brighter and the glow-

ing air inside it danced. Robby could already make out a figure kneeling in the globe. If experience was any teacher, a second person was arriving. The light intensified, surged, and went out. Robby stepped forward and stood by Rob, staring at the new arrival.

The second man stood up and Robby's breath caught in his throat. This new arrival looked just like Rob, except older. "Hello, Robby. I see you've met Rob. I'm Robert. Sorry for the surprise, but we're here to help finish the

light speed drive and perfect the Time Engine. I know you have a lot of questions, but—oh, Rob, I think he's leaving us."

Rob caught Robby in his arms as he collapsed. "That went well," he said with a laugh.

"You think?" Robert responded with a wry smile. "Well, wake him up. We've got a lot of work to do."

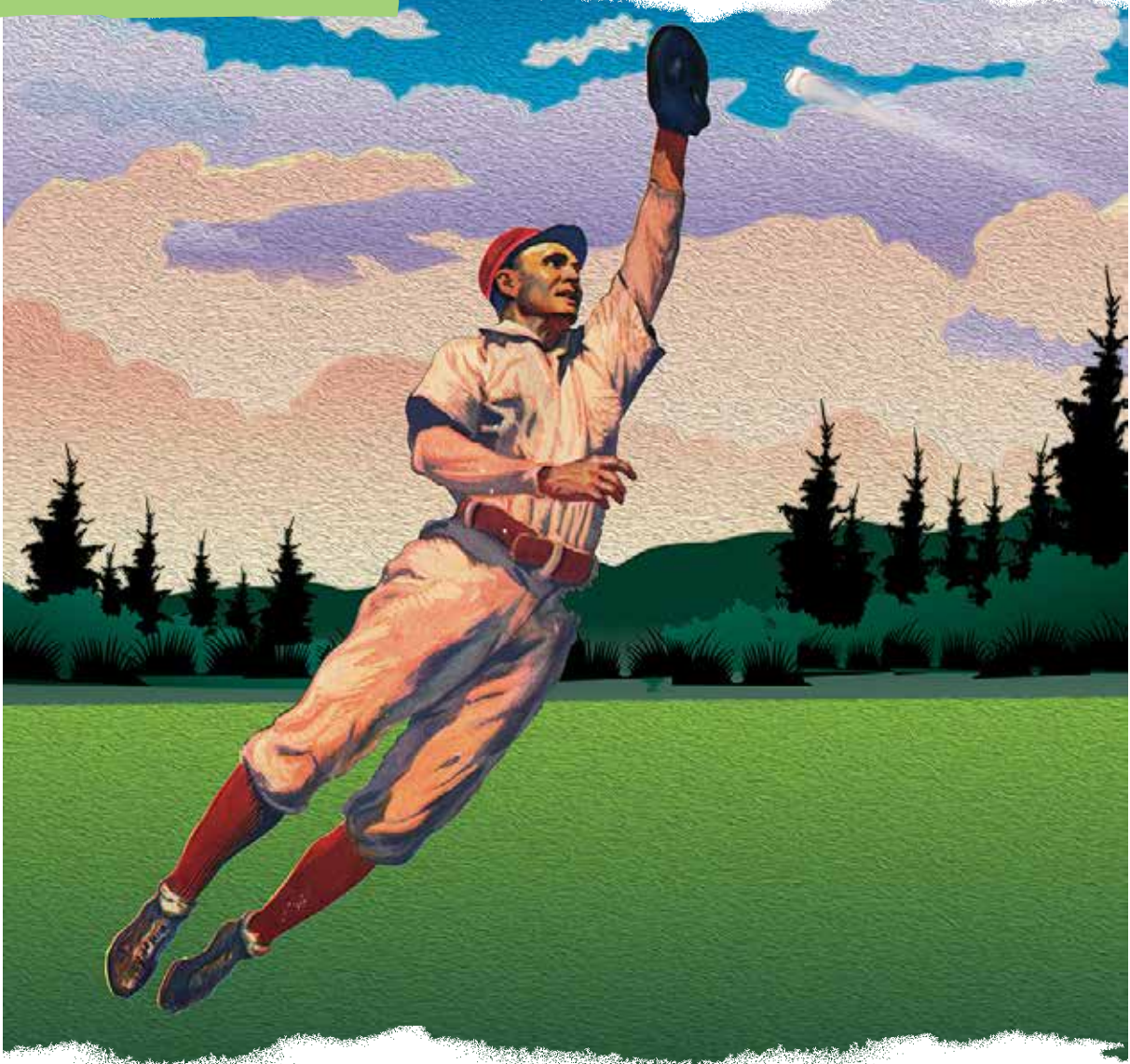
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SONGS OF THE SOUTH



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A Fine Sunday Afternoon

by Chuck Holmes

I was watching my grandson's first tee-ball practice. The coach, a young man, obviously the father of one of the little balls of energy bounding about him, tried to rein them in.

"Everybody run to first base," he yelled, and his team took off. Two things were immediately obvious. The first was that their knees didn't bend when they ran, and the second was that they had no idea where first base was.

He walked over to first base.

"This is first base," he said. And the boys all ran to gather around him.

They'd just learned their first baseball lesson: how to find first base.

The rest of the practice went much the same way. They took a group tour of the infield, identifying each of the bases, then home plate and the pitcher's mound. By the end of the hour they had increased their baseball knowledge immeasurably.

It wasn't until that night, as I was

thinking about the practice, that I realized that I could not remember a time when I hadn't known where first base was. Or, for that matter, what a suicide squeeze, a drag bunt or a sacrifice fly was. I have, so far as I remember, always had a working definition of the infield fly rule. But I grew up on a ball field, and—in season—I watched ball games every Wednesday and Sunday afternoon and played baseball every other day.

It wasn't that I was a good baseball player. I chopped my swing, regularly delivering easy-to-catch ground balls to the infield, and my nickname —*No*

Peg—pretty well described my throwing abilities. I was pretty good with a glove, and that kept me from being totally disgraced on the field. That—and the fact that I came from a baseball family.

In the late 1940s and early 50s, before there was a TV in every living room and when big league baseball was confined to sixteen teams north of Washington, DC and east of Chicago, every town had its own baseball team. Some were professional (at least at some level), like the *Raleigh Caps* and *Durham Bulls*, who played in the Carolina League, and the *Dunn-Erwin Twins* from the Tobacco State league.

That, except for the occasional pre-season exhibition game, was our idea of professional baseball.

But the teams that we followed most closely were our town teams. They were technically semi-professional in that everybody still had a day job, but more than that they were men who had loved baseball all of their lives and refused to give it up.

Our team was the *Benson Bulls*. We had Jim Thornton catching; he later gave up the position to become a local TV star and in the process launched the career of Jimmy Capps, who spent nearly forty years in the house band at the Grand Ol' Opry. At first was Will Woodall, the owner of a local clothing store, who was built a lot like Ted Williams. But what made the team more important to me was that, on most days, we had Ray Holmes in right field, Howard Holmes in center, and Bobby Holmes in left. At either short stop or third base, there was Ed Holmes. He was my father.

Daddy was built like an infielder, compact and very quick. He was 5' 8" and about 150 pounds almost all of his life, and he could move to his right or his left as quick as a snake. He also had a tendency to crowd the plate, resulting in a concussion and three broken ribs.

So on any summer Sunday, the Bulls took the field against town team from

Coats or Angier—or whoever they were playing—and they were no longer the manager of the tractor dealership, the owner of the grocery store, or the appliance serviceman at the furniture store. They were baseball players. And strained through sixty years of memory, *they were great baseball players*.

Most of the games have grown fuzzy and have overlapped each other now, but one stands out, apart from all the rest, because there were two things burned into my memory.

The first was that the starting pitcher—and in those days, that was the same as the finishing pitcher—showed up drunk. I don't remember his name, but his nickname was *Red Wing*, a

wasn't supposed to be pitching. A late Sunday afternoon.

There was, as always, a lot of chatter from the infield, telling the pitcher that he could do it, that the batter couldn't hit, and that nothing would get by the infielders. It was more habit than a testimony of belief.

The pitcher served one up right across the plate and, the batter connected, slashing a line drive—a *frozen rope*—straight down the third base line, rising from the moment it left the bat. All of the runners took off, confident that the ball would make it at least to the fence.

But Daddy moved quickly to his right and jumped higher than I'd ever

seen him, grabbing the ball in the webbing of his glove. He came back down on the bag, leaving the runner standing between third and home with his jaw dropped and nowhere to go. It was an unassisted

The pitcher served one up right across the plate and, the batter connected, slashing a line drive--a frozen rope--straight down the third base line.

double play, and it ended the game. The play more than erased his running error; it was the play that made the difference. Daddy was the hero.

It was hard to be a hero back then. Money was tight, never really enough. You worked hard sixty or seventy hours a week, and at the end of the month, there was a good chance that you were no better off than at the beginning of the month, and at the end of the year no better off than the beginning of the year. I don't think Daddy ever lived up to his own expectations.

But on one fine Sunday afternoon, Daddy had made an obvious difference, one that even he could appreciate. I don't remember him ever mentioning it again, but I like to think that as long as he lived he remembered the feeling of that moment.

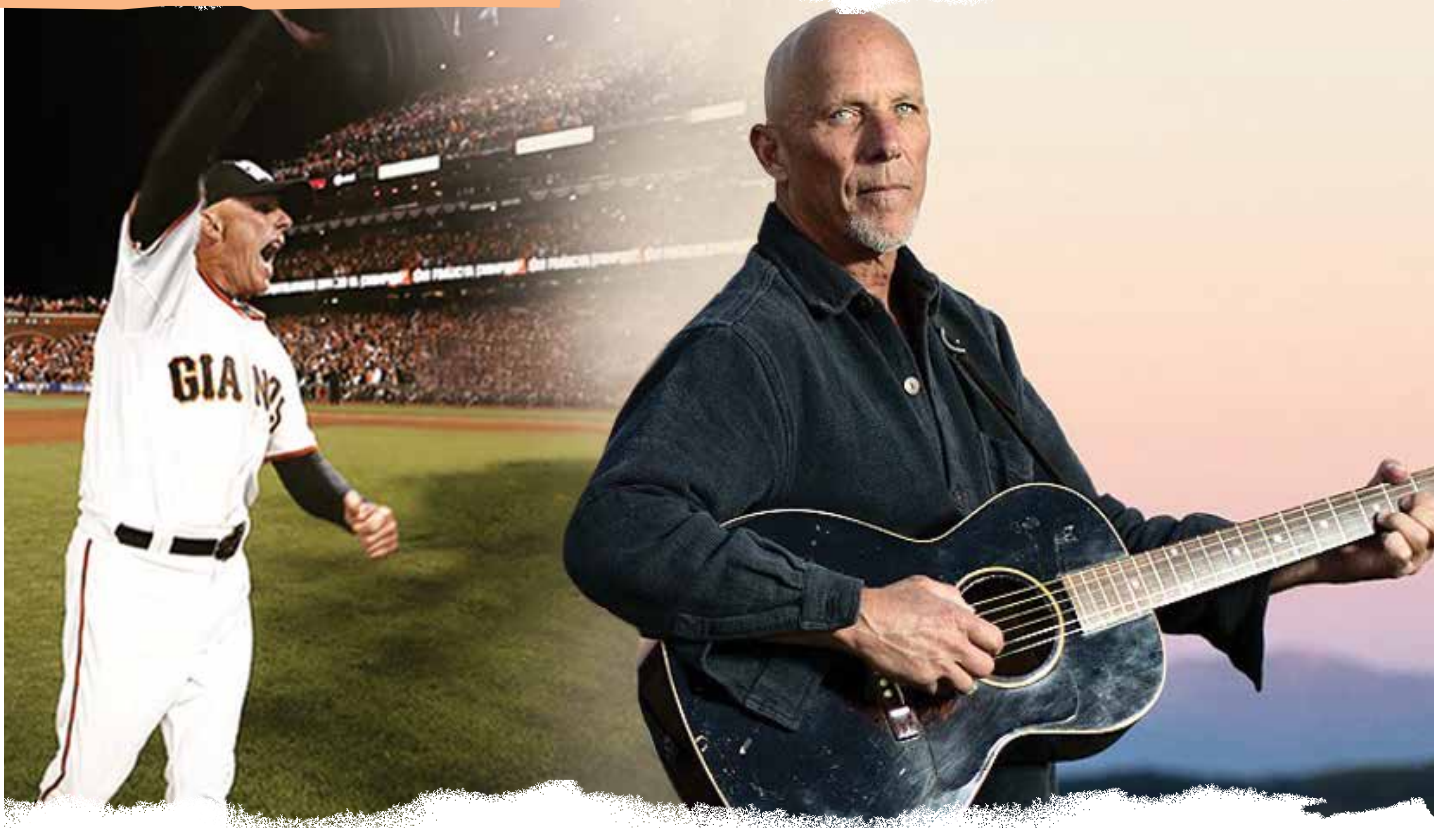
But the Bulls, without their starting pitcher and with what Daddy kept calling a "dumb, dumb, dumb play" managed to stay in the game, and—again, as I remember it—held a slim lead going into the ninth. The other team loaded the bases, and it looked like the lead would evaporate. One out. Three men on base. A tired pitcher who

double play, and it ended the game. The play more than erased his running error; it was the play that made the difference. Daddy was the hero.

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



From Coal to Diamonds:

Tim Flannery Looks Home

By David Ray Skinner

When Tim Flannery's ancestors emigrated from Ireland to the rough-and-tumble coal-mining Appalachian region of Kentucky, they brought with them a strong work ethic, a devotion to God and a love of good music.

This legacy has served him well, and somewhere along the way, he also learned to love the crack of the bat and the roar of the crowd. He grew up around music, but as a youth, he discovered a passion—and a talent—for baseball. In 1978, “Flan” (as he is known to family, friends and players) was playing for Chapman University in Orange, California when he was drafted by the San Diego Padres. In that first season, he batted .350 for the California League Reno Silver Sox. The following year, his six home runs and 71 RBIs earned him a call-up to the majors, and he played his first

major league game with the Padres. In that first game, he was one-for-three, and he drove in the second run to earn the Padres a 3-0 victory over the San Francisco Giants. He was less than a month shy of his 22nd birthday.

Flan's first full major league season was in 1982; two years later, he was playing with the Padres in the World Series as they went up against the Detroit Tigers. Always a fan favorite, Flan retired as a player in 1989, but continued with the game, becoming a third base coach for the Padres in 1995. When manager (and longtime friend) Bruce Bochy left the Padres

for San Francisco, he took him along, and Flan became the Giants' third base coach. Success followed—he helped coach San Francisco to World Series wins in 2010, 2012 and 2014. In November, following the Giants' 2014 win, Flan retired, after 33 years in the game, saying, “I’m going to send myself home safely.”

Tim Flannery's story, however, doesn't end there. Throughout his career, he always managed to balance his life on the road with the time spent with his family—his wife Donna, his son and his two daughters. He also found the time to pursue his other passion, music. But as much as he loves writing and performing, throughout much of his baseball career, he tried to downplay his music.

“When I first came to coach with the Giants, I wasn't really going to let

Southern Baseball

anybody in on (the music)," Flan told the *Santa Cruz Sentinel's* Wallace Bain in a 2013 interview, "Y'know, I just came to coach. And you don't want to open your heart and get hurt. You don't know how long you're going to be there. So, I went there saying to myself that I'm just going to hide this part of my life from everybody and just do my job and coach third base."

All of that changed, however, with a tragedy at Dodger Stadium on opening day in 2011. The sometimes-friendly, sometimes-fierce rivalry between the Giants and the Dodgers (which dates back to the late 19th century when they were both New York City teams) turned violent when Giants fan Bryan Stow was critically assaulted in the Dodger Stadium parking lot. Stow would survive, but his rehabilitation and recovery was estimated to cost tens of millions of dollars.

That's when Flan opened his guitar case and let his music out.

As the son of a minister, he had always sprinkled his Christian songs in with his tunes about baseball, heartache and Appalachia, but Stow's

story inspired him to "exercise his faith" and kick it up a notch. Also, at that time, the death of his father from Alzheimer's (Flan was his everyday caretaker) was still a recent and painful memory of the ominous toll a family member's illness or injury can take.

"I got beat up pretty good, physically and emotionally by that experience," he told the *Sentinel's* Bain, "So I know what it's like to be a 24/7 caregiver. Seeing (Stow's family)

"The only way to beat hate is to love harder. There's no other way."

come together inspired me to continue. When someone gets hurt badly or dies, everyone is there for you in that first moment, but it's easier to eventually go the other way, because everybody has their own lives and responsibilities and life goes on. But for me, it's been a real honor to watch the strength of the circle of love around Bryan. What happened to him is a hate crime basically. And the only way to beat hate is to love harder. There's no other way."

Flan and his band, "Lunatic Fringe," raised more than \$70,000 for the Stow family through concerts and DVD sales. Additionally, through his "Love Harder Project" (www.operationloveharder.com), he has now expanded his fundraising to address homelessness and other issues close to his heart.

One of his songs off his "Kentucky Towns" album, "Foot of the Cross," sums up his faith and is presented in the Appalachian style of his Kentucky roots:

"There's a place where I go to when life gets me down; a place I find refuge in this cold-hearted town. I can bathe in

the water, washed pure as snow and never again have to walk all alone. At the foot of the cross, hope can be found. Love takes the place of all that will be bound. Chains will be broken, guilt will be lost, when I come on my knees to the foot of the cross."

For more about Tim Flannery, his music and his fundraising projects, you can visit his website www.timflannery.com or check out his music on iTunes, Amazon.com or CDBaby.com.

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Diane Rankhorn and the Socialist Realist Painters

Going Home on the Morning Train

by Charlton Walters Hillis



fter the Russian revolution of 1917 and the cultural purge that followed, the surviving artists began to return to more traditional styles of art and painting, which culminated in a style known as Socialist Realism.

Stalin himself became involved in the movement and began dictating the parameters of the style in which the artists were “encouraged” to create works of art that would promote Soviet ideals.

During the height of the movement, on May 9, 1948, a half world away, Diane Rankhorn was born into an East Tennessee hard-scrabble, scratch-aliving existence. Geraldine Forrester’s baby girl (the middle one—there was an older sister, an older brother and a younger sister) was about to grow up with every Southern stereotype you’ve ever met. Poverty, a dysfunctional family and sexual abuse. Geraldine didn’t own a house or a car or a college

degree, and she didn’t often know how she would put the next meal into her kids’ mouths, but she was an artist. She was the kind of artist that’s just born that way, not even knowing she was an artist for a long time. She was the sort who’s always just making stuff. Couldn’t help herself.

She once made her family a sofa out of packing crates. She also made Diane a coat out of a pair of curtains. Not a coat of many colors like Dolly Parton’s, but a sister to it. Then there was the time they were invited to an anniversary party at the country club. Back then, poor people didn’t mingle with the rich that often—except in church—and this was a wealthy

couple from the church.

Geraldine Forrester wasn’t going without a gift, even though she had nothing and her wealthy hosts wanted for nothing. So she made a gift from scratch. She found an old brass plaque she’d had for years, found a chain to put on it, and carried it in unwrapped to present in the receiving line. Diane was a teenager and mortified, but she later learned that the wealthy woman had hung Geraldine’s homemade gift proudly in her living room.

And once, when there was nothing to make for supper, Geraldine broke the law to feed them. Living over a store, she broke into the store through a medicine cabinet. You can debate all day over how the means don’t justify the ends, but in the end, it boils down to one thing.

“We were hungry,” Diane recalls.

Later, when there was a little money, her mother discovered paints

Southern Journeys

and canvases and painted one after another just for herself, lavish brushstrokes, luxurious colors. Romance on the beach, in a sleigh, in front of a fireplace. Her own unique versions of magazine and calendar art. But her most memorable painting: a self-portrait when she was dying of lung cancer, with smoke coming out of her mouth and curling all around her head. Paintings that never made it into a gallery or a museum, although Diane sold one after her death to a collector of folk art at the Folk Fest in Atlanta. Paintings that never made even a local exhibit but filled the hunger in her soul and gave her kids something tangible to keep. Geraldine didn't have a house or a trust fund to leave them, but she left at least one of them the spirit of an artist. The kind of spirit that won't burn out but just keeps eating at your insides your entire life, with you not always knowing what's causing the heartburn, just knowing it's relieved, and in a big way, when you make something.

Her mother read quite a bit, but, other than Geraldine, very few in that little part of East

Tennessee encouraged Diane to read books, much less to go to college. But Diane had it in her to study—she says she craved learning like most kids crave candy—and when she started to

school she liked it a lot and managed to make straight A's. That didn't have much effect on the kids who looked down on her because her family lived in rented rooms up over a store or because they'd heard the police had been called the night before when her parents had a knock-down-drag-out fight. The real poverty began when she was twelve and they divorced. Her father did not see fit to support them, and they lived on eighty dollars a month and what her older brother was able to provide.

How do you move beyond things like that? How do you leave a small Southern town if you can't go to college, and the only jobs for a high

school graduate who can't type are in the mills? When the only jobs available are jobs that sustain life but kill that spirit? What you do is, you marry the first handsome man who asks you and move to another small town and have babies, and then you forget for a very long time that you have a mind of your own and can even make decisions. So you get depressed and have a breakdown.



Diane's love of Russian writers and of Russian art would lead her to two decades of work with the Socialist Realist painters in Voronezh.

"Ultimately it was art that was my way out," Diane says. "Because art, in and of itself, can't hurt you."

In her thirties she went back to school and ended up with a degree in fine arts—cum laude—from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Nobody—not even Geraldine Forrester—said they were proud of her for doing that, for being the first in her family to get a college degree. But she had one now, and she couldn't be stopped. She painted every chance she got, and she read books. Read more than ever.

"I love the way words lie on the page when they've been linked together by the likes of Robert Penn Warren,

William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor," she says, "They showed me other people sometimes think the same as I do. Before 'meeting' them, I thought I was alone in my scrambled head."

Later, she would fall hopelessly in love with Dostoyevsky, Chekov, Bulgakov and the like—writers from that place which would change her life forever. Her love of these writers—and of art—would lead to two decades of work with the Socialist Realist painters in the Voronezh region of Russia. "Going Home on the Morning Train" is the book that came of this uniquely one-woman-effort to illuminate and preserve some of the best of the art world.

I had known Diane for a while, and in 1999, she invited me to travel with her back to Russia with the idea of collaborating on a book. She had been traveling to Voronezh since 1993, and we both believed this was a story that needed to be told. Much of Diane's travels throughout Russia was done by train (hence the book's title), and we felt a book would go as smoothly as those old Soviet rail cars.

We couldn't have been more wrong.

She shared her stories, but the years wore on and life got in the way. She lost her husband, Len to cancer. That same day also saw the death of

Pavel Kudasov, a key ally in Russia. Plus, the U.S. economy went bust and art brokering suffered, and we both became grandparents. The train ran sporadically and never smoothly, but it ran. Sixteen years later, much has changed, but the story is as intriguing as ever.

Diane's life was never to be the same after the plane landed at Moscow's Sheremetzevo Airport in July of 1993. The coffee can airport, she calls it.

"It looked like somebody had saved thousands and thousands of oversized coffee cans and glued them to the ceiling," she recalls. "They were covered with years' worth of dust and grime. Like some Southern Gothic thing."

Southern Journeys

The Iron Curtain had fallen to reveal the wreckage left by the rottenness that had closed that land off from the rest of us for over seventy years. For the art world, it would be like discovering King Tut's tomb. A whole era of art buried. Of course, it burst upon the art scene because it smelled like money.

"Not that I started out to be an art dealer, Russian or any other kind, and I never made any money that wasn't immediately put back into the work," Diane says. Her intention was, and still is, to connect with like-minded souls—friendships forged out of the most unlikely circumstances—and to aid art and artists alike in whatever way she could.

Not a lot of people in Tennessee took notice when she was born on that ninth day of May, but it's safe to say they were dancing in the streets over in Russia. May 9 is Victory Day, and it's big. Victory Day celebrates the end of the Great War, the one we know as World War II.

Throw Mama from the Train

On that initial trip, which was a mission trip and completely unrelated to art, she rode the rails through

the steppes, and the conductor was a Ukrainian who took a fancy to her. He spoke a bit of English. He gave her a five ruble Ukrainian note and a sandwich made from fatback, as well as a glass of goat milk. The others were convinced she would be dead from food poisoning before they got to Volgograd, but they were most likely just jealous she got that fatback.

Failing to feel sick, Diane wandered back to the open area between cars

way. His slurred words were foreign but unmistakably rude, threatening. He put arms on either side of her and pinned her to the low wall.

"He was very drunk," Diane recalls, "and the best I could tell, he was trying to throw me off the train!"

Incredibly (some would say, miraculously), she was rescued by a fellow Tennessean who came along just in time to pull the man off her. Then they both began to laugh and couldn't

stop. It was all they could do and better to laugh than cry. And the whole thing sealed a friendship for life with the man who had saved her life. Looking back, she still laughs about

coming so close to being stopped before she got started, and in such a dramatic manner. But at the same time, it makes her even more determined to make sure this important and compelling story can be told.

Charlton Walters Hillis, has a fine arts degree, but her first love is creative writing, primarily the short story. She and Diane Rankhorn's non-fiction book about an art buyer in the Voronezh region of Russia is called "Going Home on the Morning Train."

The young man, who was very drunk, spoke with slurred and foreign words, but they were unmistakably rude and threatening.

to view the scenery. It was midnight in July, and for miles there would be nothing to see and then some huge factory would appear way out on the horizon. There were no street lights and very few houses with lights on. But she didn't have to see it to know something strange and exotic was out there, feeling it in every cell of her body, and that was enough.

What happened next happens in movies, but seldom to ordinary people, whether they are missionaries or common tourists. All of a sudden, a young man missing several teeth stood in her





All Roads Led to Cookeville

by Ron Burch

Exiting the old Wilcox tunnel in Chattanooga meant it was decision time: Over the mountains, or through the woods to get to Cookeville, Tennessee and Grandma's house?

The shorter route through Sparta or the longer one that goes through Crossville?

From my perch in the rear of old Betsy, I yelled out, "The mountains...let's go through the mountains!" Mom would turn to my Dad and raise her eyebrows. She hated

going the narrow mountain roads. She said going 'round and 'round made her

dizzy and the altitude made her ears pop. However, she deferred this and

From my perch in the rear of old Betsy, I yelled out, "The mountains... let's go through the mountains!"

practically every other decision in life to my Dad.

If Betsy was running smooth, if her tires and the weather were both good, Dad would side with me, and we'd take the highway that led to the mountains. Mom would frown, shake her downcast head and say, "Robert, you be careful, hear?" Then, instead of letting me continue to squat with my knees on the hump, leaning forward against the middle of the front seat between them, she'd tell me to sit back on my seat and "hang on."

Forget seat belts, old Betsy lacked even a backseat. A

dark blue, 1938 Chevy business coupe with red pinstripes down the side,

instead of a backseat, she had two tiny opera seats...little square cushions that when they were not being used, folded out of the way. The windows in the back were smaller than the ones in the front—much smaller. Still, from atop my little perch, whenever we were high on a mountain road, I would look out what window I had and ogle at the tiny barns and farm houses in the valley below.

I'd ask my dad, "Is this like flying?" (I'd never been in an airplane.) He'd say, "Son, it's sorta like flying. But flying is a lot smoother." In an hour or so, we'd round the last mountain and begin the final leg into Cookeville.

Mom would wiggle and complain about her ears and being stiff. She'd dig her compact out of her purse, comb her hair and refresh her powder and make-up, so she could look as pretty as one of my dad's four sisters.

I remember it like it was yesterday.

Every fall, we'd travel north to east-central Tennessee to see my grandparents. They lived at 570 Freeze Street, at the corner of Denton Avenue, in Cookeville. My grandfather was Superintendent of Building and Grounds for Tennessee Tech. My grandmother kept house, tended the chickens and the garden, and did her best to raise my dad's youngest brother, James. Dad came from a family of seven brothers and sisters. Every October, they'd all gather at the home place for a visit, usually during the week of the Putnam County fair.

At my grandparent's house, each day began with a big country breakfast. It was quite an event. Served at 6:30 am, it usually consisted of scrambled eggs, pork chops, fried chicken, fried apples, sliced tomatoes, grits or cottage fries and biscuits.

Although my grandmother had a modern electric range that had been given to her one Christmas by the kids, she still preferred to cook on her old wood-burning stove that she'd refused to have removed from her kitchen.

The temperature inside the old

stove was impossible to control. Sometimes the biscuits had a raw streak. Sometimes they were a little too brown—perhaps even burnt on the bottom.

My grandfather would look at his biscuit, turn it over and then look at my grandmother whose given name was "Prudence." When the biscuits came out light, he'd say "Prudy, don't ya think these biscuits should have stayed in the oven a while longer?"

Wiping flour from her hands onto her apron, my grandmother would answer, "RL,"—she always called both him and my dad by their initials—"I thought they were too brown yesterday. So, today this is just the way I wanted them." My grandfather would grunt, nod and resume a full-cycle

Every fall, we'd travel north to east-central Tennessee to see my grandparents in Cookeville.

of chewing—sans dentures (I never understood why he took them out to eat).

Regardless, seeing his entire face wrinkle and stretch as he chewed made me and the other grandchildren seated at the table grin and snicker—parental elbow notwithstanding.

After breakfast, my mom and my aunts would kibitz back and forth while they cleared the table, washed, dried and put away the dishes. My grandmother would join in, too, at least for a while. Then she'd head down to the garden to check the vegetables. She'd carefully inspect them and pick those she liked best—placing each one gently in the folds of her apron.

By the middle of the morning, most of the men would head to the barber-shop, the pawnshop, the hardware store, or fishing.

Me? I would sit down on the little round stool at the old pump organ in the front hallway. I'd pump away at the bellows and try to play a tune. Despite orders from my mom to leave it alone, I didn't.

Soon it was time for lunch and a nap.

In the coolness of a late fall afternoon in east Tennessee, everyone would settle in a chair out in the yard or on one of two porches, and sit a spell. The menfolk took delight telling their fishing stories and in frightening the kids and their city-slicker wives with tall tales about life in the Tennessee hills—spotting Big Foot and buying illegal whisky from the moonshiners. The stories didn't have to be true; as a matter of fact, only a few were—especially the fishing stories.

I recall the night my grandfather told of catching a huge catfish in Center Hill Lake near Smithville. He said he fought that rascal for an hour before finally getting him into the boat.

My dad chimed in and said, "That's nothing, Papa...a couple of years ago Oval (Dad's older brother) and I went fishing in Cane Creek. I hooked one that broke my line, went right

through Oval's net, and busted a big hole in the bottom of the old wooden boat. I thought for sure we'd have to swim for shore."

My grandfather gave a serious glance at Dad and then at Oval. He was all ears. "Yeah...yeah...yeah...really RL? How big was he?" (My dad was named for his dad, and back home, they called both of them "RL.")

My dad grinned a sly grin. "Papa, how big was yours?"

My dad also delighted in telling stories of how Oval was always playing tricks on him. One that I remember best involved an icy cold morning and a frosty school flagpole. Oval asked Dad if he wanted to have some real fun. Dad said, "Sure." Oval told him to touch his tongue to the icy metal flagpole. Dad did as he suggested, and of course, his tongue immediately stuck to the cold metal pole. There was no way it was coming loose without pulling the hide off. Oval laughed and went on into the schoolhouse! Dad was left there screaming, until a teacher came with a pan of water.

The most fun I ever had in

Cookeville was swimming in the river with my cousins, and going to the Putnam county fair. Every fall, the fair occupied a number of acres just down Denton Avenue. The sights, the sounds, the smells and the lights up and down the midway spun a kind of magic. My younger cousins and I liked the rides best—especially the Ferris wheel, where getting stuck at the top was the big thrill. My older boy cousins liked the girls—especially that hot number from Monterey.

My grandmother, my mom and all my aunts would walk the midway. They'd stop to see the various displays of local talent, maybe at the potter's wheel or at some other craft in process. They'd taste and perhaps buy a home baked cake or pie, a jar of sourwood honey or homemade jelly and jam.

For my dad, my uncles and my grandfather, the fair was a time for horse trading... watches, watch bobs, hunting knives, pocket knives, coins, arrowheads, rings, native-American jewelry—what have you. Out in the parking lot, some even swapped guns. They traded all evening long, and once back home, they'd spread out their loot and argue over who made the best deal.

Once I walked up on my grandmother in the backyard just as she wrung the neck off a chicken to fry for dinner. I'd never seen anything like that. That poor headless bird flipped and flopped around on the ground, bled and died.

My grandmother said, "Son, I know it seems brutal, but this is what we have to do. It's nature's way." I never forgot it... especially when my dad threatened to wring my neck for something I had done.

One year we were late making the trip. We missed the fair and the family gathering. Dad just had a feeling that he needed to get home to see his folks, if only for a long weekend.

We arrived a little after lunch on Friday. The next day, a bright and crisp Saturday afternoon in mid-November, we went to the stadium at Tennessee

Tech to watch a football game. The Golden Eagles from T-Tech won handily.

That night we popped corn and listened to the Grand Ole Opry on the big Silvertone push-button radio (only three buttons worked) that sat in the living room. It was a house rule that no one spoke or said a word during the Grand Ole Opry.

Since Dad had to be back at work on Monday, plans were for us to drive back home on Sunday. Boy, we were in for a surprise! We awoke to see the ground covered in white—the first snowfall of the season. The radio said east central Tennessee had already gotten eight inches and there was more to come.

The radio said east central Tennessee had already gotten eight inches and there was more to come.

The snow line extended south, almost to Chattanooga. They warned of hazardous driving conditions, especially in the mountains where many of the narrow, slick roads had already been closed.

My dad said, "Too bad, so sad." He had to get back to work. My mom flatly refused to risk it. She said she bet that cars were falling off those mountains like flies. Caught between a rock and a hard place, my dad showed his temper. Mom didn't budge.

Dad grabbed his suitcase and flew out the door. For the next three hours, Mom said little as she stared out the window at the snow that continued to fall.

My grandmother said not to worry; we could stay as long as we needed to. Mom now had a migraine headache and wanted to get home. We learned trains were still running from Cookeville to Knoxville, and if we hurried, we could make one that left around 1:45 PM...another one bound for Atlanta left Knoxville a little after four.

Mom opened her purse and counted

her money. She didn't have enough, so she borrowed a few bucks from my grandmother to help pay for the tickets and we headed out the door. Although Mom's fretting had me worried about my dad, I loved that train ride. It and the snow added another dimension to the trip.

When we got home, Dad was already there. Mom asked him about his drive and he said there was nothing to it. As I recall, around our house the conversation was about as cool as the weather we'd left behind for the next several days. My mom had a way of holding on to things that she placed in the largest gunny sack ever created.

There were many more trips to Cookeville after the "snow experience,"

in many different cars. But the only one I recall was when my grandfather died in 1959. Laying there in a casket covered in red roses, the thought crossed my mind that they must not be

planning for him to eat in Heaven... they had his teeth in.

My grandmother passed eleven years later, but as I was then recovering from giving birth to an eight pound, nine ounce gallbladder full of rocks, I wasn't able to make the trip to attend her funeral.

Yep, visits to Cookeville with my grandparents and all the rest of my Dad's family brought me great joy. I was an only child, so family time in Tennessee made me feel a part of a bigger, close-knit group—if only for a few days. Kinda reminds me of what the late John Denver had to say about West Virginia. "Life is old there, older than the trees, younger than the mountains, blowing like a breeze."

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.

ron.burch@comcast.net