



*The Virginia Writers Club
2018 Virtual Anthology*

Featuring the first-, second-, and third-place winners of
The Golden Nib Contest

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2018

Golden Nib Winners

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2. J. Allen Hill, Locust Grove, VA “The Man With the Robot Leg”
3. Charles Tabb, Beaverdam, VA “As Luck Would Have It”

NON-FICTION

1. Judy Light Ayyildiz, Roanoke, VA “CEREDO, WV, 1949”
2. Daniel C. Swanson, Abingdon, VA “Cousins”
3. Jason E. Maddux, Arlington, VA “How the Wind in the Willows Taught Me
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2. Richard Raymond III, Roanoke, VA “A Ballade of Bitter Beer”
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Fiction

The Man With the Robot Leg

by J. Allen Hill

Second Place

I want to go back to sleep and my eyes are itchy. I'm afraid to rub them, cuz if I do, I might fall off the man's shoulders. He is brown all over and walks funny – kinda crooked and bouncy. So I hold tight to his black hair – it's real curly and it smells good.

He don't know I dropped the lollipop he gave me into his hair. I'd like to eat some more of it, but it's stuck. I wish we could find Daddy. He promised to take us for ice cream.

I wonder where is my big brother, Dougie, then I see him walking down below, holding the man's hand. I also can see the funny leg that is sticking out of the man's shorts. I think he is a robot because his leg is shiny, and looks like the thing Daddy uses to hold up his car when he puts on a new tire. It clinks on the sidewalk when he walks. I wonder if he is the kind of robot who eats kids like me and Dougie.

The man keeps saying, "It's gonna be OK, guys. We'll find him. Don't you worry." But this place is so big. Never seen so many people. They keep bumping into us. And lots of yellow cars keep blowing their horns. But none of them are Daddy's car where I remember I was sleeping. I don't know where we are now.

The blinking signs are pretty and sparkly like the Fourth of July. I can't read them but I know the letters: E-X-O-T-I-C-D-A-N-C-E-R-S. The blue and red goes on and off and on and off. It's silly: G-I-R-L-S-G-I-R-L-S-G-I-R-L-S. Some of the lights make a glass of fizzy soda with a cherry and I'm thirsty.

I didn't wanna come here but Daddy promised to take Dougie and me to the toy shop. Now I just wanna go home.

"Watch your head, Buddy," says the robot man, cuz we're going in someplace. He crouches down so I don't bump my head on the door. I don't like this place. It smells funny. Lots of people are yelling; and it's so loud, it hurts my ears.

"OK, guys. Tell me if you see him," the robot says. And we walk through a big crowd but Daddy ain't there. Then we do it again in another place and another place. And they all stink and the ladies keep touching me and I don't like it, and I don't see Daddy. I think I'm gonna throw up.

Finally we find a place to sit outside on a bench, and the robot lets me down from his shoulders. Now I can sit next to my brother, and I do, and he holds me real tight. Then the robot starts laughing cuz he finds my lollipop in his hair and he can't pull it out. Then he tickles me and laughs some more. I remember what Mama says about strange men but I can't remember where they aren't supposed to touch me. I'm glad this one's a robot man.

“We’ll rest here a while, guys. Keep watching the people walking by. Watch for your Daddy.” So we sit and we watch.

“You guys got names?” the man asks.

Dougie tells his name, then tells mine. “He’s Alec.”

“So Doug,” the man says. “I am betting you are the big brother. Hmm, let me guess. You’re five years old. Right?”

I can tell Dougie don’t like that cuz he’s older than me and tells me about it all the time, so I stick up for him. Golly no, I say. My brother is six and he’s in first grade.

“Well I can see that now. No wonder you’re proud of him. Then I bet you are three,” he says, smiling. I can’t tell if he is making a funny, but I’m kinda mad so I pound him on the arm and shout, I am five!

“Really? Five?”

Almost five, I say.

“Don’t pout Alec. I was just kidding you.” He laughs and gives me a knuckle scrub top of my head.

That makes me cry and I don’t want to because I ain’t no baby. But Daddy does that to both Dougie and me. And I am scared because I don’t see how we are ever gonna find Daddy.

“Wow,” says Dougie. “Look.” I look and here comes a policeman on a big brown horse. I never seen such a big brown horse. When he tries to eat the lollipop in the robot’s hair, everybody laughs, even the policeman.

Then he asks us, “You boys know your address?” I can’t remember and Dougie can’t either.

“How about your phone number?” We think about it. We try. My brother says, “It’s 6122.” I don’t know it, but say that number sounds good. The policeman and the robot shake their heads.

Then the robot has a idea. “Tell me about your house, guys. What’s it look like?” I tell him it’s big and white with lotsa grass. Georgie tells him about our tree house and our dog, Bapsy, who is brown and black and drools.

“The name of your street?” Nope.

“The name of your school?” I don’t go to school, I say, and Dougie says, “St. Gregory’s.”

The policeman says he don’t think there is a St. Gregory’s in the city.

“What are your parent’s names?” Daddy and Mama, I say. My brother says he thinks Daddy’s name is George, but Mama is just Mama.

“A last name?” “Smith”, we say together. We’re Dougie and Alec Smith.”

The policeman gets on his squawky box and tells somebody all of this. Then he rides off and comes back with pretzels and sodas, and that is the best thing that’s happened all night.

So we all wait, sitting on the bench, and they keep asking stuff about Daddy. “What did your Daddy come to the city for? How come Daddy brought us with him? Why didn’t your Mama come? How did we get here?”

But Dougie and me can only tell them 'bout Mama being at Grandma's who is sick. We don't know the other answers cuz, we always fall asleep in the car on long drives. And when we woke up, Daddy was gone, so we started walking.

"Aha!" says the robot to the policeman, "I don't think they had been walking far when I found them on Broadway at 42nd. Maybe if we take them back there, they'll see their car."

"Long shot," says the policeman, and I don't know if that means he's going to shoot his gun. I hope not.

"You boys know what kind of car your Dad drives?"

"A Ford Fairlane," says my brother. And I say, it's blue and's got white wall tires.

Then we all laugh some more and the policeman says, "Now we're getting somewhere." The policeman gets back on his squawky box and tells somebody all of this.

We wait some more and play hide the penny and don't go anywhere at all. The policeman goes off again and brings back a brown bottle of beer for the robot. I never knew robots drank beer which is not a good thing. I hope it don't make him mean like it makes my Daddy. In the movies, mean robots are scary and take you up in their space ships and you never come home. Then I start to cry and hide in Dougie's lap, and he holds me real tight. I think he's worried too about the robot drinking beer cuz he's the one that Daddy hits.

Pretty soon, that squawky box says something to the policeman and he tells us, "Found the car and traced the plates. Boys, you live in Fairfield, Connecticut on 122 Greenleaf Road and your Mom is coming for you right now."

Then he says something real quiet to the robot. It sounded like, "...was taking it on the lam ... a real alky sod ... haulin' his ass to the clinker. Serve him right, Judge Tough Nuts hangs him out to dry for a long time. Completely blanked out he had precious cargo in his car."

I'm not sure what that means. It must be robot talk.

I ask is Mama mad, and he says she is happy as a clam, but we shouldn't be surprised if she' cries cuz Mom's have a way of doing that.

I fell asleep after that and didn't get to see the robot leave which bummed me out cuz I did want to see his space ship.

Dougie says Mama *was* crying when she got there. We live with Grandma now. Only thing is, she don't like to wrestle. She won't let Bapsy sleep on Georgie's bed and she is just awful at flyin' kites and fishin'. I am in first grade now and everybody likes to hear 'bout the robot man. Not sure they really believe me.

I never see my Daddy any more. I wonder if he remembers me.

As Luck Would Have It
by Charles Tabb
Third Place

Maureen felt him force himself inside her and squeezed her eyes shut despite the blinding darkness. She went away in her mind to escape the devastating violence, imagining her grandmother's flower garden instead. Azaleas, rhododendrons, and several varieties of hydrangeas grew everywhere, coloring the landscape, making the ordinary sublime. She did her best to imagine this scene of beauty and ignore the pain and invasion. As she went away, she remembered a conversation she'd had with her grandmother while walking in the garden when Maureen was no more than seven or eight.

"What's your favorite flower, Grandma?"

"The ones in bloom."

"But there are lots of them in bloom."

"And they're all my favorite."

"How can you have a lot of favorite flowers?"

"The same way I can have a lot of favorite people." Her grandmother looked down at her and smiled, "Like you."

The violence continued, squirming its way into her consciousness despite her best efforts.

Lori Dobson's analyst had advised her to start a new project to help take her mind off her daughter's disappearance, but that wasn't possible. Not yet. Maybe never. The reality met her each morning like a devastating phone call in the middle of the night and stayed with her throughout the day until sleep finally anesthetized her to the loss. Then, the previous day would repeat itself. It made Lori think of the movie *Groundhog Day*, but without the happy ending. There could be only one happy ending here: Maureen's safe return home.

Lori's only daughter had been kidnapped seven months ago. There had been no phone calls, no ransom demands, no body—no closure. The fourteen-year-old had simply vanished as if alien monsters had zapped her into oblivion.

As she went through each day, she looked at the faces of every stranger, wondering. She pictured Maureen somewhere, locked in a room, screaming fruitlessly. Her daughter was alive. Something, somewhere, would feel different if she died, as if the pain of severing that permanent umbilical cord between mother and daughter would register with her.

Lori's husband, Stephen, had broached the unthinkable two months ago. "Start facing it, Lori! She's gone! She'll never be back! It's best to accept that and get on with our lives!"

Two weeks later, Stephen packed his bags and moved out, disappearing as surely as Maureen had, except that he at least left a note saying he was leaving, or as

she thought of it, running away. Not that she would have searched for him. Their marriage had died the moment he'd told her he believed Maureen was dead. She'd known the marriage had been dying for some time, and she didn't have the energy to fight the inevitable.

Unlike Stephen, Maureen had not run away. The police were sure of that. A girl who knew Maureen from school had seen her walking toward the rec center. In the thirty seconds it took the girl to put on her coat to join her, Maureen had disappeared. It had been an empty street with open sightlines well down the road. Only a few of the houses were occupied since most of the neighborhood was under construction. The girl remembered a white work van parked at the corner when she first saw Maureen, but it was no longer there when she came outside seconds later. The girl's description of the van led police to believe the older cargo van was possibly a Ford or Chevrolet, but they didn't narrow their search by make, only color. The girl had been adamant that there had been no writing on the side panel. The police had looked into workers in the area, but their vans all had advertising on the sides.

That was the extent of the clues.

Each day had been the same for Lori. Wake to the nightmare and slog through the habit of what her life had become until sheer exhaustion from the worry led her to bed and dreams of Maureen. Sometimes they were good dreams of her little girl alive and home, but when she woke, the brief joy would crash into a heap of memories and pain.

However, today had finally dawned differently.

The buzzing of her phone had awakened her. She groggily stared at the vibrating phone on the bedside table, buzzing insistently as if it knew the importance of the call.

When she saw the screen announcing Maureen was calling, she bolted awake. Lunging for the phone, she knocked it to the floor and scrambled to get to it before it went to voice mail.

Kneeling on the floor by the bed, she grasped the phone and pressed the button to answer, nearly screaming into the mouthpiece, "Maureen?!"

Only silence greeted her at first, and Lori thought her daughter had hung up, thinking her mother wasn't answering because of all the pain, or worse because she didn't care.

Then a breath. A man clearing his throat.

"Maureen?" Lori said again, confused, as if the name *Maureen* in the caller ID had identified the actual person calling, not the phone being used to make the call.

She waited an eternity that lasted seconds. Then a man whispered, "I know you're worrying. Don't. She's alive. She's with me now. Move on. Forget her."

"Who is this?!" Lori demanded.

"I've got her now," the man continued, ignoring the question. "She belongs to me. I just wanted you to stop worrying. She's alive."

"Please!" Lori begged. "Let me speak to her! Please!"

There was a pause, as if the man might be considering her request. Then, the call went dead.

She stared at the phone as her first tears of joy in months spilled down her cheeks.

Lori immediately called the detective that had been assigned the case. He'd given her his personal number, and his groggy voice answered. She suddenly realized it was still early but didn't apologize, instead launching into the details of the call.

"Are you sure it wasn't a prank?" Detective Pantera asked.

"It had her caller ID!" Lori said while doing her best to contain her excitement.

Pantera thought for a moment, yawned, and said, "Okay. We can assume it was the guy who took her. Tell me again exactly what he said."

Tony Pantera had gotten to know Mrs. Dobson well enough that he had little doubt that the conversation would be etched in her memory for years, so he trusted the words she repeated. He doubted she got even one syllable wrong. In his twenty-two years with the Richmond police force, he'd learned how intent some parents could be when it came to finding a missing child. He'd never met a woman more focused on getting her daughter back than Lori Dobson.

He wrote on his bedside pad what Mrs. Dobson told him and said, "This is good. It sounds as if he might be a bit remorseful, worried that you're worrying, that sort of thing. He might even completely regret what he's done. I'll be out there as soon as I can. I have some things to take care of first. Then I'll come right out."

Lori thanked him and disconnected. Then she fixed a breakfast that for the first time in months would taste good.

When Detective Pantera arrived, he sat across the kitchen table from Lori. He was lean and muscular for forty-five. He had an angular face that was clean-shaven and thick, dark hair that was graying at the temples.

"He called from her phone," he said, "so we can see what cell tower the signal bounced from on his end by getting the information on that call from your carrier. That will give us a perimeter to work from. It was early and if he was home, that will help a lot."

"What if he calls back?" Lori asked.

"Keep him on the line as long as you can. If he's driving, the signal will bounce off successive towers, giving us an indication of his route. That could give us some clues about the area of town where he works."

Pantera was shocked the guy had made the call, but then again, he wasn't. The perps always made a mistake, a miscalculation; otherwise, they wouldn't catch any of them. The guy had probably felt safe using the girl's phone instead of a burner after all this time. So many people knew nothing of cell technology. For the first time since he'd caught this case, Pantera could see a possible light at the end of the tunnel. It wasn't much of a light right now, but it was the first beam he'd glimpsed, and he felt good about it. Once they did one stupid thing, they often did more of them. He hoped this guy would. This case had haunted him for months. If the guy was telling the truth, and Pantera thought he was, one of these could end well for a change.

Calling his precinct, Pantera got someone working to get the LUD's, or Local Usage Details, on Maureen's phone. Once he had them, he could determine which cell tower or towers were used to relay the call. Leaving the Dobson's, Pantera took care of a few unrelated matters before driving to the precinct, giving them time to get the LUD's.

Using them and a large map of the city with cell tower locations, he found the tower the call had gone through. Using a drafting compass, he marked a circle with a two-mile radius around the tower and stared at the map. Because the surrounding terrain was residential and fairly flat, Pantera was certain the call had to come from somewhere inside that circle. He continued gazing as if staring at the map long enough would yield the location. Using a pencil, he began to shade out small areas inside the circle that might have gone through a different tower due to the proximity to other cell towers.

When he finished, he had what amounted to a number of subdivisions where the call most likely originated.

Then he took out a box of pushpins and the months-old list of local owners of older white cargo vans in the area and began painstakingly placing pins on the map to indicate the vans' locations while ignoring the ones too far from the circle to be considered. When he was finished, his scalp tingled. Three pins were lodged inside the circle. Two of those were inside the areas likely not covered by a different tower.

Prior to this moment, all they had was a list of 112 white cargo vans owned by people in the four-county area. They had already eliminated the ones owned by a business that had lettered the side panel with advertising, leaving twenty-seven. They'd spoken to each of the twenty-seven already. None of those panned out, at least not with anything they could prove. Now, though, they had more. They had a possible location that matched only three of the vans.

Of course, they'd considered that the perp might not even be from the Richmond area, but they had to go on what they could until the trail led elsewhere. This call basically proved he was local. Although not a spiritual man, Pantera prayed this would be the break they needed.

A K9 unit met him at the home of Landon Morris, a small-time landscaper. When they arrived late that afternoon, the van was parked in the driveway. They let the dog sniff a shirt Maureen had worn that had been ziplocked into a bag the day after the disappearance and approached the door.

Pantera pressed the doorbell, and Morris came to the door.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"Mr. Morris? You remember me?"

"Should I?"

"Yes, we spoke several months ago about your van."

Morris eyed the detective for a moment before recognition dawned. 'Oh, yeah. Still lookin' for that girl?' he asked.

"Afraid so. You mind if we come inside?"

Morris shrugged. "I got nothing to hide." He stepped back and let the K9 officer and dog in with Pantera, who already had the feeling they wouldn't find anything here. Morris had seemed genuinely lost as to why they might be there, and the real perpetrator would not forget the previous visit and questions. Pantera doubted he was faking.

"Do you mind if we have a look around?" Pantera asked.

"Be my guest." Morris went back to his sofa and the program on TV. He appeared completely unconcerned.

After a thorough but fruitless search by the dog, Pantera stepped into the room to thank Morris for his cooperation before leaving. There hadn't been a single hint from Morris' behavior that he was lying.

Climbing into their cars, they drove to the next location, the home of Wilbur Armstead. After they knocked, a woman came to the door and told them she had been married to Wilbur Armstead, but he had died three months ago of a sudden heart attack, an event that didn't seem to bother his widow at all. A quick phone call verified the woman's story.

Finally, they stopped at the home of Jason Kormann, the man who lived outside the more likely area of the circle Pantera had drawn on the map. When they arrived, Pantera knew it would be a long-shot. The house appeared vacant; it sagged in the overgrown yard. He knocked on the door, but nobody was home. There were no vans or other vehicles in the weed-choked driveway, so Pantera decided to check with a neighbor. Kormann had indeed moved to Denver four months before.

The K9 officer left, and Pantera decided to drive around the area, not knowing what he might spot, but doing his best to familiarize himself with the surroundings. It was something he did when stuck on a case that felt ready to burst open despite today's disappointment. He liked to return to the crime scene or some other place associated with the case and just drive around, thinking and trying to put the pieces together so they all fit. That was something that drove him. While working a case, he didn't understand how the pieces fit together, but he knew they did. He just had to solve the jigsaw puzzle of facts.

Someone who likely lived in this area had made that call. The call had come early in the morning, around six. Most people didn't think about how easy it was to track cell phones. He couldn't imagine this creep doing something like coming to this neighborhood to throw them off the scent, especially that early in the morning. It was possible, but highly improbable.

In his wanderings, Pantera reached a slightly more affluent area. This was more of a middle-class neighborhood, one with mostly manicured lawns and a few shade trees. The houses were small, but well-maintained. Pantera lived in a neighborhood like this one, nice but not too pricey. He thought of these places as "decent job neighborhoods" because the owners weren't rich, but they had a job that was good enough to afford a nice little home.

A late-model Buick pulled onto the street from a side street ahead of Pantera. He paid no attention to it until the driver turned into a driveway. Pantera glanced

down the driveway by habit, and what he saw nearly made him jam the brakes to a tire-squealing halt.

Sitting in front of where the Buick was parking sat an older, slightly dented white cargo van. It seemed out-of-place in the neighborhood, where most of the cars were fairly new and in good shape. Pantera parked his car on the street a few doors down and took out his phone, pulling up a picture of the pin-marked map. Of course, there was no pin in this location, but it was in the area of the circle he thought of as the likely origin of the call.

Turning in his seat, he stared at the van, and puzzle pieces began gathering to form the beginning of a shape. This guy could have purchased the van since the kidnapping, but one detail made Pantera believe that wasn't the case. The van had been backed into the driveway, so the front faced the street. Pantera had asked for information on white cargo vans in the four-county area. The hood of this van was a dull red. The rest was white with no lettering, and the white paint looked much newer. When this van had been purchased, it was red. It wouldn't have made his requested list, especially if the paint job had been done since the last tag renewal, which in Virginia could be as long as three years. Pantera pulled out his phone.

Twenty minutes later, the K9 unit had returned and joined Pantera, who had used the time to ring a few doorbells and ask about the van and its owner.

"Yes, he's owned it for about a year. . . ."

"Well, it was red, but he painted it right after he got it. Lord knows why he didn't paint the hood. . . ."

"Mr. Taylor? Yes, I know him. Nice gentleman. A teacher at Clayborn High School. . . ."

When he heard that, Pantera's heartbeat quickened. Maureen had gone to Clayborn. He took out his earliest notes on the case and saw the name Don Taylor from when he'd interviewed Maureen's teachers. He was her math teacher.

He'd thanked the neighbors, and after bringing the K9 officer up to speed, he rang Mr. Taylor's doorbell. They waited several minutes, but no one came to the door. Even more suspicious now, Pantera pounded on the door.

"Mr. Taylor?" he called. "Please open the door, sir. This is the police. We have a few questions."

The fact he knew Taylor was in there and not answering the door led Pantera to believe they had found their kidnapper. The three deadbolts on the door, security overkill, told him he wouldn't be able to kick the door in, heightening his suspicions even more.

Turning to the K9 officer, he said, "Stay here! I'm going around back!"

Pantera moved carefully around the side of the house. When he got near the back yard, Taylor leapt from some bushes and ran toward the front around the opposite side of the house.

Pantera called out, "He's running!"

Suddenly, vicious barking came from the front, along with a scream of terror. When Pantera arrived, the dog was standing over the prostrate body of Don Taylor

while the K9 officer cuffed him. The dog continued to bark, assuming the stance used to indicate he had found the scent he was tracking. The smell of Maureen Dobson was all over Don Taylor.

“What’s wrong?! Why were you chasing me?!” Taylor demanded.

Pantera knelt beside Taylor’s head. “Where is she?”

“Who?!”

“Maureen Dobson. She’s here, and we know it.”

“You’re crazy! I live alone here!”

“The dog says different.” Pantera knew he could claim imminent danger of an occupant of the home since it was possible Taylor had injured her before fleeing, and he fished Taylor’s keys from the man’s pocket.

“What are you doing? You can’t go in my house without a warrant!”

“I can if the dog says I can,” Pantera said.

Finding Maureen had been simple after that. A heavily padlocked steel door had been opened, revealing a second padlocked door to a room within the soundproofed outer room. Inside that room, they found a naked and afraid Maureen. The totally dark interior room where she’d been kept had toilet, sink, and shower in one corner. A switch in the outer room operated a ten-watt bulb in the ceiling of the inner room. Night-vision goggles in the outer room told the rest of the story.

They found her clothing in a bedroom and allowed her to dress in the dim light of her prison before blindfolding her to protect her eyes from the bright light she’d not seen in seven months. Pantera escorted her to a separate bedroom to get her away from what she had to view as a torture chamber. Pantera called Lori with the good news. She arrived shortly after the ambulance.

Lori held Maureen, who buried her face in her mother’s shoulder and wept, beginning the lifelong process of healing.

Though not able to leave yet, Pantera went outside and climbed into his car, finally relaxing as he smiled. Sometimes luck was a cop’s best friend.

Non-Fiction

CEREDO, WV, 1949

by Judy Light Ayyildiz

First Place

We slapped bare feet against the brown and greening breast of April—JD, JudyG, and Little Pete, at eleven, eight, and six. After peeling back the gray vines that wound the trees, came the daring launch out over Twelve Pole Creek. We pulled beyond muddy banks into the sky.

While Momma and Daddy were off to work, we three watched out for each other, commanding our realm, bound by Route 60, a river-called-a-creek, hills full of untended woods, an air reduction plant, ten train rails, and a saw mill. Our small, white-frame house sat in the midst of it all.

Given to lecturing on stuff, Daddy told us how Ceredo got founded way back when. We good kids ogled on the edge of the porch, feet rubbing against the red clay below, while he pushed us back to 1857, when some, who didn't believe in slavery, settled around Ceredo, naming it after a mother goddess named "Ceres." Mother goddess didn't mean squat to us. Wise-guy JD quipped, "Now ain't that the cat's meow?" Daddy gave that look that he might as well be talking to a wall, and then, turned away towards the shed. JD wooed at us and grinned toothy like Ruff the hound dog did when he dreamed. "You watch. Time Daddy comes back, he'll tell us again how that mound over in *Camden Amusement Park* proves real Indians roamed these parts."

"An Gees Wachingdon!" Little Pete squealed.

"Got that right," JD answered, giving Little Pete a soft fist on the shoulder, "Washington mapped out and drew up on paper this here whole part. Ceredo wasn't even in West Virginia back then. People measured in what they called, "poles." JD was going to be in the seventh grade come fall. He continued with authority, "I'll be dipped if it makes any sense to me either, but back then, a "pole" was as long as a tall man."

"I get it, Twelve Pole," I shouted.

"Yep," he answered, "Our creek measures twelve tall men across it, somewhere or other." I remembered—it was like a whole forest when the big flood came last year.

And Daddy, well, we knew where his bottle got stuffed in the shed, over in its corner behind a half bag of concrete mix, that he bought to set the stump that held the teeter totter he built last year. Made it from a big board he talked off the saw mill guys. Momma didn't know about his stash. Else she'd have poured it down one of the two-holers.

Momma worked as a waitress. She wore her long red hair rolled back in cones behind her ears, with a pointy white and black cap on the top of her head. Her

bleached-white-as-a-summer-cloud uniform sported a ruffled apron with two deep pockets for tips. A frilly handkerchief drooped from a pocket on the left side of her boobs. Every night, she pulled out the bottle of white polish with the picture of a nurse on it. She claimed that she had to take care of her sturdy shoes so that she wouldn't get fallen arches.

Momma hardly ever had a chance to show off her pretty feet by just lying around. But, I remember her sitting on the little brown bench that Twelve Pole Creek uncovered when it dried up around the railroad buttress. She went through one of those thin paperback romances in that afternoon, propped there reading in the sun with her freckled back against the concrete—as if the railroad had built it just for her. We kids hand-shot water into one another's faces. Overhead, on the one-line trestle across the gap, trains groaned the weight of the world against the rails, so loud that we all moaned to mimic the pity of it, even though Daddy reminded us that we didn't have any idea yet of just how heavy the world could get. In that slant of light, my Momma, that Daddy called "Glad", slouched on her sand bar like a young girl who could have been only babysitting us for an hour or two. On other days, Momma'd pin the cap to her head and be ready for work when we set off for school, checking us over to make sure we went out the door clean. She washed clothes on her time off, fastened them out on the line to dry, and then ironed them at night after she got home at nine.

On a long, middle-May afternoon, we champion explorers bounded from the school bus. Momma waited in the yard while we ambled past the eight lines of the *C & O* train tracks, over the field, and onto the two lines of *B & O* tracks that ran by, only a horseshoe throw from our yard. The tracks stretched through the heart of our world. We balanced on their silver rims. The trick was to see how long we could go without slipping. The tracks stayed smooth from the wheels of the steam engine cars and *Chessie Cat* coaches. But, in that flouncy air, we didn't see the train. The whistle shrilled a bit too late.

We teetered on the tracks. The Big Black barreled head-on. Momma ran, shouting, sure she would lose, in one black second, the best of her world. As the engine wailed and rushed, she swooned against a tree, clinched her eyes and surrendered.

In less than a minute, the scattered clack and rattle of the caboose was yanked on toward the bridge across Twelve Pole. Momma leaned into the bark and did not breathe, "...trying to become the tree," she would say many times through the years.

And then, her angels squealed on the blackened bank that shouldered the tracks. We three hung onto twigs and roots, our feet lodged into rocks. Of course, we were quick and agile apes of banks and rails. But what pulled us up and held us suspended in the time it took for the thunderous train to pass us by, none of us will ever know for sure.

When that May wound down to its end, I, geared-up with the others, stood in line with my third-grade class under the [peaked](#) glow of the ceiling light bulbs of the

school's entrance hall. I had been informed by my teacher that morning that JD and Little Pete were to be picked up at lunch by Daddy. Momma should be here for me after my final class. I guessed that perhaps our parents planned a surprise for us kids. Maybe it would be an end of school year adventure.

At the bell's whang, eight lines of grades loosed a chorus of shrieks, tumbling down the steep steps toward our crazed dream of summer.

My "Promoted to Fourth Grade" report card and a half-page paragraph with a gold star titled, "Vacation" jutted from my paper bag, full of my year's left-over stuff. Momma waved from the other side of the stone fence that hemmed the school, her mouth an open smile. She called.

Minutes later, she was telling me how Daddy and she "took the day off and hired a truck to load up our mattresses, lamps, skillets, and rugs." A truck? "And—just so you know, they're already delivered." They? There? "...placed in the new house." I knew that they had been talking off and on about looking for a new home; but, I pictured a move would be months away.

Momma continued, as if leaving Ceredo was not just awful, shocking news. Happy, she rambled on about how modern everything "...will be from now on. We'll live in a house on a street in Huntington!" I clinched my bag of junk and hugged it hard to my chest.

As we headed for the bus stop that would take us from Ceredo, she answered me in a laughing voice. I could have just as well got hit on the head with a rock. My mind filled with spots of my world of the past three years: my older and younger brothers' Creek-splashing, my cot, sleeping in the lull and long haul of trains, engineers waving, hills of beechnuts and huckleberries, *Camden Park* pony rides, and cowboy campfires in the dusky field.

Five minutes later, Momma and me had gone two blocks out the street, where we stopped. Zooming ahead in my mind, I imagined getting off at our little white house near Route 60, where a cinder road led away from the highway: *step onto the gravel. Like the familiar crunch of it. There. Over to the left, a neon light, The Cozy Rest sign. The owner, Big Arabella, fires it up early every afternoon. The gravel, thick as a plowed field. Place spreads all around a brown wooden hall as big as a church, sprawls out under a red tin roof. Cozy Rest quivers in the evenings with noisy music and wound up crowds. Skip on down a bit and out our dirt lane, grooved by truck tires, hooved up with weeds in the middle. On round the road, the saw mill on the left bend back under the trees. Slings off on week days its loud whanging. Its metal teeth split and spit timber. Across the lane, the way-high silver chain fence keeps anybody out except Air Reduction employees. Metal containers line up on the front platform like giant bottles of Dr. Pepper soda pop, ready for the two men who are always careful not to drop one while loading. Truck beds, packed full, head on, bound for whoever in the wide world needs all of that air.*

Our three-room white house, with back porch, and yard all around, rests quiet as

a hen on a nest. Up its side bank. Yard turns into gravel, where it levels off, on account of the train tracks. Engineers with blue-striped hats smiling and nodding like neighbors. Strangers at tables with starched white tablecloths, waving through windows like they wished us well. Trucks up in the gravel lane hauling mouthfuls of timber. Imprisoned cows headed for slaughter. Tanks of reduced air. Trucks' frozen blocks swinging giant silver tongs over and onto the porch and into the ice box there. Gray wooden porch. Gives room off the edge for sticking palms out for rain. Spilling from the roof while Momma on her Sundays-off from The Chicken Shanty plops tea glasses full of frozen chips from the ice box.

Our handy rock-ringed drinking well bulges up. Only a few feet from the porch. Electric. Touch two live wires together and it hauls up the pail. Only one time was scary. Little Pete. Could have been electrocuted. Grabbed the live wire. Tried to pull him back. The singe ran through us both. But Momma threw the switch. Let us listen to the radio all afternoon, on our teeter-totter. Totter's big bolt holds it all together, stuck through the board to the stump. Momma said, "A bolt or two a day seems to hold Daddy." But not always. One end up in the air and one stuck in the clay. Daddy made it without help.

Beyond the well, the path cuts through the scrub grass to the outhouse. A two-holer, no less. Sometime, I was planning, having a girl from Ceredo town spend the night so I could show it off. In the day time, thin blades of sun from between its loose boards cut silently across body parts, not leaving a mark.

On further, at the end of the lane, the slaughter house leans toward ole Twelve Pole. Above where we fish and swim. From which we ran when the flood came up from the slaughter to the edge of our porch, and on into our little white house.

A warm breeze slapped my red pigtail against my jaw; brought me back to the bus stop. I glanced up at the blue and white sign. "The bus is running really late," Momma said in her nervous voice. A black car sped by and jerked over a pothole. I wanted to ask her why she and Daddy didn't tell us that they had decided on that new house. But I didn't. The thought of asking made my stomach feel like it was pushing into my throat. Momma went on and on about how "There's going to be a grocery store and churches a few blocks up." As if I cared. As if she were a sales lady. She wasn't looking down at me, her girl. Didn't notice my pouting lips. Her marble eyes seemed to hop onto my shoulders, across the top of my head and out past my feet. "Maybe since we are all going to be citified," she stated, "we will talk differently and put on airs, be people with a bathroom just out the hall door and right up the stairs." I scrunched-up my toes tight inside my black and white school shoes. "Now, of course," she smiled, "we'll have to share it with the nice couple that lives on the second level but what problem can that be?"

On and on, Momma told about a high-ceiling green and white kitchen with rows of windows, a running water sink, and a white enamel gas stove that we'll "light with a match just as quick as a wink." No more poking chopped wood dragged in and smelling like the hills. "No coal stain on our hands or smoked-up kitchen." Toilet paper. Cars and skates. A counter to put bowls on while she cooked. My Momma,

overnight, turned into a Chatter Bug. How could we get used to this new Momma if she stayed this way, so glad to get rid of our home?

No more floods. No swimming hole. Gone, the squat, solid iron wood and coal stove with the metal pipe up through the roof that kept us in the winters as warm as popped corn. Wonder if she'd forget how to make spaghetti? Truth be told, she might have been dreaming of having a gas oven during the times that she fed the wood stove.

At the curb, Momma smiled again, as she pulled me from leaning against the sign. When we walked out to the street from the school, she didn't notice my stretching sideways and back. Didn't know why, when we passed that house with the brick sidewalk, I'd be checking for the hundredth time to see if I could catch that nice grandma who fixed me lunch that day last fall when I'd left mine at home. The closed door of her house in this heat, with no light inside for making soup or having guests, gives the back of my neck a creepy feeling. I've missed my chance in ever being able to properly thank her: Mrs. Fairchild. I will never forget the good luck of her. Was it the perfect day, or some might say, I was just so hungry that I made it all up. Or was it really a time to get rescued by a fairy godmother? Actually, Mrs. Fairchild was the one who nicknamed me JudyG, since I was already named for the famous movie star. The nickname made me feel special, like I could do something worth talking about. After that, I told my brothers to start calling me JudyG. They'd laugh if I told them why. Anyhow, they do it. Momma and Daddy took us to the movie house in Ceredo one Saturday to see "The Wizard of Oz." After, I concentrated more on how to open my eyes real wide and speak clearly.

Momma squeezed my hand and let go when I didn't squeeze back. I looked up when I heard the rolling moan and sneeze of the late yellow bus. The door slapped open. After we climbed on and found a seat, Momma settled down a bit; she patted my hand and talked in hushes.

Ten minutes later, I strained forward in the seat and toward the window as we neared the bridge. We skimmed across ole Twelve Pole. A glint spearing up from the water below clipped me across the face. The rails at the side and the speed we were going blocked my sight of it. As the bus slowed for *The Cozy Rest* roadhouse, I pushed up and reached for the cord. Momma caught my arm and brought me down. "No, we're not getting off."

Not getting off? This is our stop where big Arabella will pause from serving up foamy beer to ask me how it feels to be a fourth grader. "Not even for a while?" I asked her, rising up. How could I ever just pass by without even walking up to the *The Cozy Rest*? My brothers and I made it to fame in there, singing for Saturday night customers last summer. Momma, with no idea how special the roadhouse plays in my mind, jerked the skirt of my dress. When she caught my eyes, she told me gently, "Don't be sad. Good times are waiting."

The bus had stopped to pick up a man with a box. He couldn't find the right change for the fare. I scooted around, balanced on my knees, and looked out onto the

gravel road, trailed beyond *The Cozy Rest*, down by the beech tree, around the loop, right on past the tall chain link fence, and into our yard. “Did you bring the dogs, cat and chickens, the ducks?” I sputtered. The bus flapped shut its door, growled, then sighed with being anxious to pull away. “They won’t be able to fend for themselves.”

Momma lifted my hands into hers, and mouthed words I could barely hear. “They are in a good place.”

“Oh no!” My tears plopped onto our fingers. The pets were family.

Momma sat back and squeezed her knuckles. They cracked. “Of course, we made sure they are all right. They have a home, we saw to that.”

“But, where are they?”

“A place you like. Safe and well-suited for them.” she said simply. Momma went on in a low voice about how we aren’t allowed to have even cats in our new house, let alone howling dogs who would dig up the yard. Chickens and roosters would mess on the sidewalk. “The city won’t stand for anything like that.”

With slobber in my mouth corners, I grabbed her arm above her wristwatch to make her stop. “So—where are they?”

I snuffed, gulped and gripped her arm tighter, forcing her with my little girl eyes. “Mrs. Murphy was pleased to take them all—until we are able to pick them up again,” she told me. Momma’s clear eyes clouded. I could hardly swallow. “Mrs. Murphy’s farm is good for critters. We can visit on a Sunday sometime—you know you are always welcome at her place.” Mrs. Murphey’s farm, where JD, Little Pete and me went after school and on Saturdays when Momma and Daddy had to work. I hoped we would still be able to go there. The pets would be glad to see us often.

Maybe. I took in a deep breath and huffed it out. My brothers. “Where are JD and Little Pete?”

Momma laid her blue-eyed stare on me. “Why,” she started, unclicking her black vinyl purse, “they’re at the new house with your Daddy.” Neither of us spoke while she created a ceremony of taking out a handkerchief with pink flowers and blowing her nose with her head bent down. She, then, hugged me to her pillow bosom. I sniffled long past Camden Park and its drop-dead rolley coaster. She continued about the new friends I’d have to play with, and how the bikes we got last Christmas would get parking space in our new hallway, and of the big flat lawn on which we would be able to picnic, come July the Fourth. I was only able to think of our hot-dog campfires in the meadow at the base of the hills along Piedmont Road. And, even coal cars full of fancy white appliances would never replace our black wood stove with the hot-cave oven.

The Cozy Rest roadhouse lights up in my mind smart as a Christmas Eve on the edge of midnight. Crispy yet soft yeast rolls steam in a cast iron skillet. JD, Little Pete, me and Momma and Daddy, along with Ole Ruff trudge over past Piedmont Road to the hills where we do us some huckleberry picking. In a special spell of hushed space, all the days that up to now have looped the seasons, sweep around me in thick waves.

Like passengers asleep in the *Chessie Cat* cars, we moved, almost unawares, into the new.

Cousins
by Daniel C. Swanson
Second Place

The 1953 Chevy slowly made its way along the two-lane road leading to town. The car was shaped like a large turtle. With its high ceiling and no seatbelts, I was able to stand up in the back seat and peer at the passing countryside through the car windows that always needed to be washed. The air was thick with coal dust from the tandem coal trucks that made their way from the many larger “union” mines as well as the small, non-union “truck” mines from across the county. All of the buildings, cars, and the people that we passed seemed to be covered with the same coal dust. As dusk approached, the last rays of sunshine struggled to pierce their way through the dust and smoke.

There wasn't a lot of flat land in Wise County. Most of the flat land ran along the rivers and creeks. The rivers and creeks shared the valleys with the few roads that ran through the area as well as the tracks for the railroads that carried the coal to distant ports and power plants. As we approached the City of Norton on the way to a rare night out, we started to pass by an area with holes that ran back into the hillside and brick archways that framed the front of these dark and foreboding openings. I soon began to notice an orange glow from the hillside as we made our way around a bend in the road.

Fire roared from these openings in colors of red, orange, and yellow, and black smoke belched from the archways. I could feel the heat on my face through the car window even though it was a cold day in December, and the temperature hovered near the freezing mark.

“Ooh, that's stinky!” I exclaimed as I wrinkled my nose in disgust at the acrid smell of sulfur that hung in the air.

These roaring fires were called “coke ovens.” A “coke oven” was basically a furnace where metallurgical coal was burned at high temperatures and a lack of oxygen to form “coke.” The “coke” itself fueled the furnaces used in the steel making process during the booming years following the end of World War II in far off places like Pittsburgh and Detroit.

“Is that hell?” I anxiously asked my Mom as we drove by the ovens.

“Yes, it is, Son.” Mom responded with an implied threat that I would end up there if I misbehaved.

I was three years old, and these coke ovens were one of my earliest, and scariest, memories of growing up in Wise County in Southwest Virginia. It was also one of those memories that I never forgot.

Growing up on the family farm, my neighbors all shared three attributes – they had large families, they were poor, and their last names were Collins, my mother's maiden name. The land around our farm became known as Collins Mountain. Years later, when the county established 911 addresses, the road to the family farm was

named Collins Mountain Road. My neighbors were related to either my Mom's or Dad's side of the family or, in a few cases, both Mom's and Dad's sides of the family!

Dad's sister, Hazel, lived across from us with her husband, Olen Collins, and their five sons. Their property was in a relatively flat, swampy area that had a lot of copperheads and a pond for a swimming pool. We played baseball with a rubber ball and bat almost every day during the summer. Pitching was critical because retrieving home run balls was particularly hazardous because of the copperheads and the swamp.

Mom's first cousin, Vencil Collins, and his wife Mae lived next door to Hazel and Olen. Vencil had suffered a tragic accident as a young man when a large firecracker exploded and blew off his hand. His hand was buried in the Collins family cemetery near my Mom's childhood home. At the end of his life, he was buried next to his hand. One of their oldest daughters, Bama Jean, was the only cousin who suffered from a poisonous snake bite when she was bitten by a small copperhead near their home.

Mom's cousin, Hassell Collins, and his wife Ruth lived next door to us. They had eight children – five boys and three girls. My brothers, my sister, and I always seemed to be involved in a family feud with these cousins. Mom and Dad would often go food shopping after Dad got home from work in Friday evenings. During the summer, we would occupy ourselves with our Friday night rock fights with our next-door neighbors. We would collect “ammunition” all week, stake out our positions on the cliffs between our houses, and prepare for battle. The actual rock fights were ferocious, but short lived. They ended with the first casualty who was immediately removed to the “hospital” on our front porch for an ice pack. If blood was involved, the “patient” was asked to bite on a stick for the pain, and orange “mercurochrome” antiseptic was applied to the wound.

Mom's sister, Vonda, and her husband, Leonard Sturgill, and their several children lived in the “S curve” on US 23 heading toward Pound.

By one count, we had a total of seventy-six first cousins, and most of them lived near our family farm. Being a part of a large extended family growing in a sparsely populated rural area inevitably resulted in a lot of “cross marrying”. Many years after the passing of my grandmother, Louise Collins, Mom's Dad, Jezreel, took the widow of his deceased brother, Elbert Collins, as his second wife. Her name was Etsy Collins, before and after the wedding.

These marriages resulted in some interesting “complications” in the extended family tree. My Mom and Olen Collins had the following familial relationships:

- Olen was Mom's brother-in-law (Olen married Dad's sister Hazel)
- Olen was Mom's step brother (Olen's Mom Etsy and Mom's Dad Jezreel married)
- Olen was Mom's first cousin (Olen's Dad Elbert and Mom's Dad Jezreel were brothers)

Dad's relationship with Leonard Sturgill was almost as interesting. Their

familial relationships were:

- Leonard was Dad's Uncle (he was a brother to Dad's Mom Nannie)
- Leonard was Dad's brother-in-law (he married Mom's sister Vonda)

Having lots of cousins living close to us really came in handy when I was nine years old. It was a hot August Saturday afternoon. Mom and Dad had gone for their annual school clothes shopping trip to town. I was babysitting my sister, Kathy, age six, and my brothers Ricky and Dallas, age four and two, respectively. During the summer the boys often occupied themselves by capturing and trying to turn some native critters, like baby rabbits, squirrels, and turtles, into pets or catching snakes, bugs, and toads to frighten the heck out of our sister and female cousins.

My brother Ricky had been collecting brown and yellow turtles in the fields around our home in a wooden "dynamite box" that Dad had brought home from work in the coal mines. We had two small mixed breed dogs that would search the fields for turtles and alert Ricky with their incessant barking when they found one. He had collected several turtles in the box. I was sitting on the front porch when Ricky came around the house.

"The dogs are barking at a whole pile of turtles under the cherry tree," he exclaimed.

"OK, OK" I responded.

The cherry tree was located behind the outdoor toilet on the edge of the garden. I wasn't that interested in turtles. However, having been left in charge of my younger siblings, I felt that it was my duty to investigate the situation.

During August all of the weeds and ground cover started to take on colors of gold and brown. As I stared into the weeds under the cherry tree, I had a hard time making out the shape of what I was seeing.

"Ain't no turtles under that tree," I reassured my younger brother.

After my eyes adjusted to the shadows and streaks of sun under the tree, I could finally see the "turtle" that Ricky was ready to put in his dynamite box. It was not a turtle. It was in fact a coiled, diamond back mountain rattlesnake! It was coiled into a "pile" that was at least a foot high with its head swaying back and forth as it followed the loud barking and movement of our small dog.

I had killed copperheads before, but I knew my limitations. Luckily my cousin and next door neighbor, Hassel Collins, was home.

"Help, it's a snake; it's a snake!" we all screamed.

He brought a rake, gave the snake a whack when it tried to crawl away, and killed it. It measured fifty-two inches long and about three inches in diameter. It had thirteen rattles; we kept them and the memory of this frightful day as souvenirs. We never killed another rattlesnake on our property, but we killed copperheads almost every summer. We considered poisonous snakes as one of the natural hazards of growing up on a mountain side farm.

My adventures were not restricted to the yard of our family farm. By the time I

turned twelve, my first cousin Larry and I had officially become “mountain men.” We would often pack up our pup tent, .22 caliber rifles, sleeping bags, and a few items of food and head off into the woods that ran for hundreds of acres around our homes. We would stay gone for days, subsisting on the few items of food that we brought and wild game like rabbits and squirrels that we shot along the way. We drank water from a natural spring that had the initials of our great grandfather, Berry C. Collins, carved in a rock adjacent to the spring. That rock was destroyed later in my life when the area around the ancestral home place was stripped to allow surface mining of the coal.

We often camped in an area of the county called “Glady Fork” because it had lots of water and wild game. On one particular night, I was awoken by some critter walking around outside our tent. We had made a campfire the night before by pushing over a few small, dead trees near our campsite. I looked outside the tent to determine what kind of critter was in the area. As I stared into the pitch-black night, I poked Larry with my elbow to wake him up to take a look.

“Larry, there are stars on the ground!” I announced as I looked on in awe at what I was seeing.

“Those are not stars” Larry reassured me.

The ground around our tent was sparkling like the stars in the moonless sky above our camp site! The roots of the small dead trees that we had used for firewood had an eerie green, luminescent glow caused by the fungus that had attacked the rotting wood.

“It’s called fox fire” Larry explained.

The critter left the area, and I went back to sleep. We collected some of the fox fire the following morning to take home as a souvenir.

Technology during the early 1950’s was pretty basic. We had a black rotary phone and a “party line” that served our home along with the homes of several of our neighbors. Each home had a distinctive ring that notified us that the call was for our home. We had an honor system that meant that we only were allowed to accept calls meant for our family. However, we did find that these party line phones, if you were very quiet, were a convenient way to keep up with the events in your neighbors’ lives as well as neighborhood gossip. A typical call went something like this:

“Can you believe how Mrs. Johnson was dressed at the Piggly Wiggly Grocery Store last Saturday?” Hazel asked.

“Yea, with that tight, low cut dress, she left very little to the imagination! She looks like a “hussy”!” Ruth responded.

I quietly hung up the phone and went looking for Mrs. Johnson.

We were the first family on Collins Mountain to get TV – black and white TV in the mid 1950’s followed by the “magic” of color TV a couple of years later. I will never forget our reaction when Bonanza, the first show that we saw on our new color TV, burst onto the screen.

“Wow, look at the colors!” we exclaimed.

The Friday night “professional” wrestling matches were the biggest

neighborhood attraction. On a typical Friday night, our small TV room would be packed with uncles and cousins all pulling for their favorite wrestler and booing their least favorite villain. As the matches progressed, my uncles would contort themselves to mimic the positions of their favorite wrestler and offer frequent advice as they appeared to be in danger.

“Look out behind you!” Uncle Olen yelled.

“He’s got a chair!” Cousin Larry warned, but it was too late.

We received three channels, NBC, ABC, and CBS, from the TV wire that ran up to the antenna in a tree on the top of the mountain behind our home. At least once a year during the summer, lightning seemed to strike the antenna, “fry” the wire, and result in us running new wire up to the antenna.

Another popular event was the annual molasses “stir off” that one of our neighbors up the “holler” had in the fall of the year. This day long event required two mules harnessed to the long poles of a grinder to walk slowly in a circle grinding sugar cane to produce raw sugar cane juice.

The raw juice was then boiled over a wood fire for several hours in a large flat pan that that was roughly four feet wide by eight feet long until the sugar cane juice boiled down to become molasses. The molasses were poured off into jars, and all of the children were allowed to take pieces of sugar cane, chewed on the end to make it like a paint brush, to “sop out” the left-over molasses in the pan.

Work was a daily part of our lives. We had a lot of regular chores on the farm. These included hoeing the corn, potatoes, and beans in the garden, carrying water from the creek for washing clothes, cutting mining timbers, cutting and splitting firewood, making “dummies” for sale to the coal mines, and picking apples, strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, and wild “possum” grapes for canning and making jelly.

The food that we and our extended family ate was scarce and very basic. Everyone had a garden, and most had a few apple trees. Some of the families received surplus US government food from a distribution warehouse in Norton. We all loved the large blocks of “government cheese” although our Dad was too proud to accept it.

“That government cheese is for poor people” he said. Dad never saw his family or himself as poor.

Our cousin Vencil had a connection to a store that gave away stale bread, cakes, and other baked goods with expired “sell by” dates. We, along with several of our cousins, feasted on honey buns, raisin cakes, and a number of baked treats. They tasted pretty good – if you tore off the parts with the blue mold.

From an early age, we were constantly looking for ways to make extra money. We did not receive an allowance, so we only had spending money if we earned it ourselves. My first job at age nine paid me ten cents per day to build a fire in the pot-bellied stove in the Riner School. I collected “pop bottles” that we returned to the Kilgore General Store to collect the three-cent deposit. My biggest opportunity to make money was during the summer when I would get up early and head up into the woods and the “strip jobs” near our home along with my dog Rusty to pick wild

blackberries.

A strip job is the flat area that remained after bulldozers scraped away the side of the mountain to expose the seams of coal that were then mined or “augered” and sent to market.

These strip jobs were prime habitats for large “shade” blackberries and copperheads. I had trained Rusty to go into the briar patches to sniff for snakes before I waded into the weeds to pick berries. I would leave home around 7-8 AM, pick two large buckets of berries, sell them to my regular customers for fifty cents per gallon, and be back home before noon with empty buckets, berry stained fingers, and two or three dollars in my pocket.

In the days when child labor laws were less common, we also picked beans on our neighbor’s farm up at the head of Scott Roberson Hollow Road for fifty cents per bushel. On a typical day we would pick five bushels of “half runner” green beans, get a free lunch of green beans of course, and be home by supper time with a sun burn and three dollars for a full day’s work.

Between battling rattlesnakes, working on the farm, and earning money wherever I could, I began school at the Pound Elementary School in town. By that time, many of my cousins had moved from Collins Mountain, and our lives followed a different path. It was my first ride on a school bus as I headed into the sixth grade. It had at least eight to ten rooms but no oiled floors or pot-bellied stoves. It had indoor plumbing. Sixth and seventh grade students attended the school.

My social life in school got off to an interesting start. It became clear that the students in the school were divided into two distinct social groups – the town kids, mostly children of college educated parents, and the rest of us. The first group lived in the one upscale area in town commonly called “the Pound Bottom”; I was in the second group. I was convinced that I had reached the pinnacle of the social ladder in school one day that winter when I received an invitation to a twelfth birthday party for one of my classmates who lived in “the Bottom”.

I nervously prepared for my emergence into the social scene in town as the big day approached. On the day of the party, I put on my best clothes, brushed my teeth and used mouthwash, and slicked down my hair, including the “cow licks” with Brylcreem from a tube in the medicine cabinet.

My Dad dropped me off early. I scanned the guests and saw a couple of the cutest girls in class. We talked and took turns playing 45 RPM records on a small portable stereo. The menu included club style sandwiches, birthday cake, and fruit punch. The entertainment for the party consisted primarily of an extended game of Spin the Bottle. For those not familiar with Spin the Bottle, the game required each participant in turn to spin a glass bottle on the floor, usually a green glass Coke bottle, and kiss the first member of the opposite sex on whom it stopped “square on the lips.”

“Kiss her, kiss her,” my buddies chanted when my turn came as they elbowed each other in the ribs and laughed hysterically.

I must have kissed all of the girls a dozen times, the first time that I had

actually kissed a girl! I left the party with chapped lips, a cold that lasted a week, and memories that lasted a lifetime.

The 1960's marked the end of the end of the tight knit community of cousins that I had experienced growing up in Wise County. My aunts, uncles, and cousins left Southwest Virginia as they pursued better job opportunities for their families far away from the poverty and diminished expectations of our lives on Collins Mountain.

They scattered to the State of Washington, Ohio, and Florida. I had cousins literally living from Seattle, WA, to West Palm Beach, FL. Today, my children mostly "talk" to their cousins through social media. They have first cousins whom they have never met.

My sister, Katherine, was recently discussing an upcoming weekend visit to our home for a family wedding with her grandson, Jacob. She was explaining how he would be staying with his seven-year-old cousin, Noah, whom he had never met.

He listened intently, but after a few minutes he turned to her and asked with the honesty that only comes from a four-year-old "Nana, what is a cousin?"

My generation became the last in my extended family to experience these closely-knit families. Like many of my cousins, I left Collins Mountain after high school to never return. I was able to dramatically improve the standard of living for my family vs. that of my parents, but that prosperity came with a price.

How the Wind in the Willows Taught Me About Mortality
by Jason E. Maddux
Third Place

Death. They say it comes to us all. They say it's one of the few constants in life, along with taxes, but at what age do we truly grasp the concept? I'm still talking about death. No one truly understands taxes, at any age.

My oldest daughter is four. Recently, she started talking about death. When will we die? Who will die first? Do animals die? My wife and I approached these questions by responding factually. We don't use clichés and don't dance around the topic, though we sometimes speak in general terms. We won't die for a very long time. Mommy and Daddy will die first. Yes, animals die too.

These types of questions are a natural part of my daughter's development, but it caused me to think about when I first confronted death and my own mortality. When I was eight, I remember my parents calling my younger sister and me into their bedroom one evening. My mom told us our great-grandmother, her maternal grandmother, had died. My sister and I knew her as Grammy, but we didn't know her well. We saw her about once a year when visiting my grandparents in Florida. She lived a couple blocks from their house. We'd go over to visit and spend the entire time playing with the few toys she kept at her house, presumably for that purpose. I don't recall ever talking to her or ever receiving any affection from her. So when I received the news of her passing, I don't recall being devastated. I also don't believe we attended the funeral.

Grammy's passing was my first experience with a person's death. Thinking back, however, that event was not when I confronted death or my own mortality for the first time. I must thank *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) by Kenneth Grahame for that honor, indirectly, and Disney World, directly.

Following closely on the heels of the death questions, my daughter wanted to read *The Wind in the Willows*. At some point, we received a used copy of the abridged version. Even abridged and with plenty of illustrations, it's long for a children's book. Usually, my wife and I break up longer books into several reading sessions. However, needing to kill some time one afternoon, I read the entire book to my daughter in one sitting. I admit I wanted to. Triggered by my daughter's morbid curiosity, I thought I remembered a death scene in this book. I couldn't recall specifically, so I was curious how Grahame presented such a morbid topic in a children's story. We read the whole book, but there was no death scene. Did I misremember?

It turns out I did. The scene I remembered was not from the book. Instead it was a scene from Mr. Toad's Wild Ride at Disney World's Magic Kingdom. Mr. Toad's Wild Ride was an original ride on opening day for both Disneyland in 1955 and the Magic Kingdom in 1971. I first rode it in the early 1990s when I was in the 10-12 year old range.

The scene I remembered involved sitting in the ride's conveyance (a jalopy) and bouncing down railroad tracks in the dark before colliding head-on with a train—as depicted by an oncoming locomotive headlight. A door then opened taking the jalopy into a depicted of “Hell.” The death by train collision and subsequent Hell scene do not appear in *The Wind in the Willows*. I was duped!

I also was shaken. I remember exiting the ride, disturbed by the fatal encounter with a train. Did I just die? Could I have died? Will I someday die? That's when my mortality hit me—in the middle of the Magic Kingdom. Thanks, Disney.

In hind sight, I do thank Disney. Though I returned to the Magic Kingdom only once or twice since, Mr. Toad's Wild Ride remained my favorite ride each time. Alas, the Magic Kingdom version closed in 1998, replaced with a Winnie the Pooh ride. When we take my daughter to the Magic Kingdom for the first time this fall, I will insist we partake of this usurper ride. When my daughter asks why a sad smile graces my face, I will explain I remember the ride that came before. I will not burden her with thoughts of my, or her, mortality. We can trek to Disneyland, where Mr. Toad's Wild Ride remains, for that. What parent wouldn't want their child to have her first near-death experience at the hands of Disney?

End

Poetry

A Ballade of Bitter Beer

by Richard Raymond III

Second Place

Another hour has trickled down the drain,
 (For fools will count the minutes as they pass,
 And I, a greater fool, will play the ass),
 Ho, barkeep! Fill my tankard once again!
 There's warmth, at least, and old companions here,
 Though many more have gone beneath the grass,
 But as I contemplate this empty glass,
 There's worse to drink, thinks I, than bitter beer.

Although my taste runs closer to champagne,
 My income only serves for beer, alas!
 (And this brew only serves to give me gas),
 Ho, barkeep! Fill my tankard once again!
 There was a time, a hundred grand a year
 Was scarcely deemed sufficient for my class,
 And Calvados seemed cheap as bottled Bass—
 There's worse to drink, thinks I, than bitter beer.

I *do* have taste, I hasten to explain:
 My wardrobe was hand-tailored in Madras,
 I can tell beaten gold from plated brass.
 Ho, barkeep! Fill my tankard once again!
 (I'll buy this blowsy slut a cup of cheer—
 A cold night's shelter, never mind the lass.
 "Paris," quoth Henri IV, "is worth a mass.")
 There's worse to drink, thinks I, than bitter beer.

ENVOY:

*Prince of All Mercies, ease me of my pain,
 Whispering Hope, dispel my doubt and fear!*
 Ho, barkeep! Fill my tankard once again,
 There's worse to drink, thinks I, than bitter beer!

