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Expressions 1983

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Photo by Dan Felsen
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Photo by Dave Williams
Beginning

By Mary Evans

Laughter and giggles
Sniffles and wiggles
Upturned faces
Dirty places
Skinned knees
Climbing trees
Tangled hair
Life without care
Childhood days
In the mind forever plays.

Photo by Barbara Leonard
Attempting to write about my earliest sexual experiences is almost synonymous with writing a chronicle of my friendship with Kris Martin. We were best friends during our elementary school years; and we spent our summers together, content to have no other playmates.

It's difficult to say for certain--somehow looking back and trying to remember details makes me aware of how inaccurate my memory can be--but I think Kris was my first "love." I admired her body as only an eight-year-old can appreciate another eight-year-old's physique. I
can remember her wearing her royal-blue gym suit, the shape of the muscles in her arms and legs visible under her smooth, tanned skin. I never tired of watching her move, especially run. She was fast, always left me following at a distance, marvelling at how the tendons behind her knees would appear and disappear as her muscles strained to carry her faster. Fluid, seemingly effortless, her movement was beauty and held me spellbound in admiration.

On one occasion in the locker room at school, she allowed me to touch those tendons while she flexed and extended her leg. They were so hard, so sinewy under her soft, warm skin. I didn't want to stop touching them; something tingled in the tips of my fingers and in my tummy.

Her face was strikingly ordinary—striking to me, ordinary to most everyone else. She had brown eyes, a cute nose, healthy-looking cheeks, all framed by an ordinary mop of very ordinary dark brown hair. But she had a wonderful smile, full dark lips and perfect, white teeth. At the playground one hot afternoon, we sat under a giant pink turtle in the sandpit and kissed. The sensation of her lips pressing into mine far surpassed the thrills of tendon-touching. I don't recall what led up to the kissing, but I remember liking it. She must have liked it, too, for she initiated it time after time when we were alone together after that first afternoon.

I was jealous of anyone who took Kris’s attention away from me, and I was happiest when we played together away from our other friends. One of our favorite places was a dilapidated old farm near my parent’s home. We both loved animals and were delighted by the handful of barnyard creatures the ancient farmer kept. Sometimes he would let us ride his old mare or help him chase the tottering bull out of the cornfield. There were all sorts of buildings on the place—two large barns and numerous sheds—each showing the same signs of age as the farmer and the other inhabitants. The most fascinating of all, however, were the mountains of abandoned equipment, old wooden wheels, wagons, crates, and plows. Among all this debris, Kris and I acted out our fantasies: sometimes we were boys, sometimes girls, sometimes one of each; and, occasionally, when in particularly serious moods, we were grown up.

Far from the buildings in a clump of gnarled and lightening-battered cherry trees sat a deserted Conestoga wagon. One steamy August afternoon, perched on the weather-worn seat, Kris and I played “pioneer.” Fiercely we drove the imaginary horses; screaming wildly we shot at imaginary Indians; skillfully we dodged imaginary flaming arrows. At last, we escaped the savages and slowed our team to a stop.

“That was fun,” I remember Kris laughing. She hugged me, tickled me, pulled my hair. I smiled in agreement as she planted one of those special kisses on my mouth. “Would you like to touch me in a different place?” she questioned. “Put your hand inside my jeans.”

I remember looking around, fearing that someone might have overheard her, expecting to see an adult nearby. I felt guilty and strange. The branches of the trees hung down almost to the ground, shielding us from sight. I knew we were safe; but, still, I trembled. She asked me again; and after another quick glance toward the buildings, I reached over and slid my small hand inside her waistband. We sat there for a long time. We must have looked ridiculous. I simply could not move—neither closer nor farther away. Finally, my courage (bravado? curiosity? desire?) overcame whatever uncertainty I felt. My hand moved downward over her belly until my fingers felt the flesh becoming softer. It was damp and very warm. We both sat stone-like, staring straight ahead, not speaking while the seconds stretched into infinity. My heart’s pumping pounded, echoed in my ears as my entire nervous system sent impulse after impulse through my eight-year-old frame. Again, she kissed me; her body began to move against my hand, slowly at first, then faster. Her arms tightened their grip around me, and soft, kitten sounds filled the air around my head. My stomach tightened; something stirred deep within me; and frightened, as much by my own response as by her behavior, I jerked my hand away. Confused. Ashamed. Embarrassed.

Almost immediately, we climbed down from the old wagon and walked toward home, at first in silence and then chattering about everything under the stars except what had just happened. Later, I wondered why I had stopped; I wondered what would have happened if I hadn’t. And I began to regret that I had.
Jean Dixon, the famous psychic, had predicted that a snowstorm would hit last week. It was to have been so bad that a third of Iowa’s population would starve to death because they couldn’t get out to buy food. I didn’t really believe that anyone could see into the future, but I was thinking about her prediction as I watched the snow slowly cover the windows.

Last night the phone rang. It was the railroad wanting me to deadhead on a train to relieve a crew that had been working all night. It had been snowing all night and I didn’t really want to go. I used the only excuse I had. “I can’t get my car out of the garage to get there.” “Don’t worry,” came the railroad’s reply, “We’ll pick you up on the snowmobile.” So that’s how I got to work.

We had to wait for two hours until the train got to town. It was decided that three engines would be added to the two already on the train, to help get us through the snowdrifts. The snow was coming down so fast and heavy that the six section men, with brooms and shovels, could not sweep the snow away fast enough to throw the switch so we could add the engines. More section men, more brooms and shovels, and three more hours and the engines were finally on.

We started to leave town, building speed. At least we didn’t have to worry about cars on the crossing. There was too much snow for anyone to be out driving. We were plowing a lot of snow. I think we would have had a better chance of making it if we had left three hours earlier with the two engines that we had.

As we were coming out of Devil’s Hollow, between Nevada and Colo, it happened. The loud pop and hissing air left no mistake. The train had broken in two. The emergency brakes and the snowdrifts stopped the train almost immediately.

The head brakeman stood six feet two and weighed two hundred and twenty pounds. He started walking back to find where the snowdrifts had lifted the pin to separate the train. The snow was blinding. If he had gotten ten feet from the train he would never have found his way. He would have just walked around in circles till he dropped from exhaustion.

He didn’t even make it to the last engine when I heard his voice on the radio. “Hey Dick, I can’t even walk through this shit!” The only thing that he could do was come back to the lead engine.

Meanwhile, we heard over the radio that train 247, that was coming at us,
had broken in two. The big plan began. We were to cut off our engines and go find 247. Then, after 247's train was back together, their crew would help us with our train.

We finally passed their engines about three miles east of Colo. Things were going pretty well until then. As we passed their stopped boxcars, the snow we were plowing had no place to go. Finally, our engines were stopped by the wall of snow. We backed our five units up and got a run at the drift. We broke through three or four drifts this way, but on the fifth drift we had trouble. We stopped, backed up and rammed ahead and hit the drift. Then, when we put the units in reverse, we just sat there spinning our wheels.

So, there we sat, one and a quarter million horsepower in the middle of nowhere, stuck in a snowdrift, wondering if maybe Jean Dixon's prediction was a week off. I had only a cold can of chili, and the engines kept getting colder and colder as we helplessly watched the snowdrift engulf our engines and 247's train. The radio was our only link with civilization and the dispatcher gave us the message: 'There's nothing we can do for you.'

After ten hours, sleep overtook me and, as I drifted off, I couldn't help but wonder if I was part of the third of Iowa's population that was to starve to death.

The light in my eyes and the pounding on my window startled me awake. 'Where am I? What happened? How did you get here?' Our saviors had arrived in the form of ten snowmobiles. It was useless even to try to open the doors. It was much easier for the men to dig the snow away from the window and let us climb out. With the help of the snowmobile's headlight I could see that the drift had covered the engines so that the snowmobiles could drive up on top of them. After a freezing three mile ride we had reached the oasis of the Colo Motel.

I survived that snowstorm, but I think next time I'll pay a little more attention to what Jean Dixon has to say.

---

"Bass" Hawg

By William McElvogue

Over the course of the summer me and 'Old Run and Gun' must have caught a ton of fish. The trouble was most of 'em were caught in the living room. The one I am writing about wasn't caught; he was the proverbial one that got away.

I stopped at the local fishing tackle store and purchased a new rod and reel and was foaming at the mouth by the time we hit the lake. It was one of those days when the clouds hung low over the lake and the water looked like green wine. The air smelled heavy with rain and the wind-whipped whitecaps peaked up like mom's meringue pies.

I was using a lure called a coach dog because of its color. It was white with brown spots and was a fish 'killin' mother. I knew I was going to do fine just watching that scrumptious baby wiggle her butt through the water at the fish that way.

We pulled the boat up to a willow that had it's roots deep in the water. Those ugly snarled roots looked to me like a witch's grin. 'Run and Gun' told me to coast right into the middle of them because the granddaddy of the granddaddy of the lake was holed up there. He wasn't kidding either. That bass hit my lure with a bang that sounded like the hammer of Thor going off. I jerked the rod back as hard as I could and guess what, nothing happened. I had forgotten to lock the drag down when I put my rod and reel together in the car.

I watched, sort of in a semi-coma, as that fish tore off several yards of my line. Have you ever seen a fish walk on water? Oh baby! He was all the way out of the water and walking on his tail. It was jerky, lashing, physical movement, that told of his proud power. His blood red gills were slapping together with a sound that reminded me of a wet dog shaking off water. He spit my lure about five feet from his mouth and just as suddenly as he appeared - he was gone.

I go back to that spot whenever I can swallow enough pride. You see, on a quiet day, I swear I can hear that fabulous bastard screaming and laughing and hugging his scales with his fins to keep his ribs from breaking, while he remembers the clown who literally let him off the hook.
MEMORIES

of an Ozark Childhood

By Kerry Kuyrkendall

On November 3, 1980, Nettie House was seated at the head of a long table surrounded by friends and relatives. All were gathered round at Granger Manor to join in celebration of Nettie’s ninety-fifth year of life. Laughs and smiles crossed Nettie’s tanned and wrinkled face as she tried to take in the excitement from all angles. Everyone sang “Happy Birthday,” and she leaned forward to blow out the multitude of candles covering her cake.

After her birthday party, Nettie’s grandson, Bill, introduced me to her. Nettie was wearing a printed cotton house dress under an old quilted bathrobe which hung loosely on her small frame. A package of yellow tissues stuck out of the pocket of the robe. Her knee-high nylons were rolled down around her ankles and she wore a pair of pink knitted booties on her feet. A hairnet fit snugly around her head, leaving a red mark across her forehead. A wire attached to a plastic molding in her right ear led to a small hearing device clipped on the collar of the robe. A pair of round, rimless glasses rested on the end of her nose and she made no attempt to push them into place. Her appearance revealed her age.

Nettie’s appearance, however, did not reveal her character. As I talked with Nettie, it didn’t take long to discover that she spent the dearest and largest part of her life in Missouri. She spoke in a slow voice that drew out each word with description and frosted it with Ozark slang. Using these qualities, she unfolds a favorite story to a listener as though she were turning the pages of a book, making her memories of the past come alive.

“Things were a lot simpler way back when, but you worked harder for ’em. Times were hard when I was ‘a growin’ up. I was born and raised on a little farm close to Arroll, Missouri. I had two sisters. One died when she was eighteen years old and my other sister lived to be ninety-two. I and two brothers who died when they were babies.

“We lived in a log cabin on the farm. There was just two rooms. It
was pretty crowded when company came by, but it was comfortable for us. My sisters and I slept up in a loft. When we was little we all slept in the same feather bed, but when we got bigger we had our own beds," Nettie said.

Nettie explained that her mother crafted feather beds for her family to sleep on. "Mother kept geese. She'd stick the ole goose's bill under her arm and there she's sit," Nettie said, while imitating the process in which her mother plucked a goose. "That ole goose wouldn't bit her that way," she joked.

"My mother gave my sister and I each a feather bed when we got married. My sister didn't want hers. So, I said, 'All right then, I want it.' So then, I had two nice feather beds to lay my little ole kids on," Nettie remembered.

A warm, cozy feather bed was the best place to be on a cold winter night in Missouri. Outside, the snow and fierce wind would find their way through even the tiniest cracks in the wall of Nettie's childhood home. A blazing fire in the fireplace helped to keep the tiny cabin warm in the winter. Nettie recalled the fireplace, the only source of heat, was made of stone only to the top of the house.

"From the top of the house on up, the chimney was made of stick and clay. Sometimes that stick and clay would get hot enough that it would get on fire. Pa would have to go out and carry buckets of water up a ladder to the roof and pour water on it," Nettie said.

Nettie's father was very special to her and many of her fondest memories were of him. She recalled, "My father was quite a hunter. I remember one time he brought home twenty-one turkeys. My mother, her name was Lis, asked Pa how he managed to shoot that many turkeys in one day. "Well," Pa said, "that's a secret." Later on he told me that he took cowbells with him when he went out huntin' turkeys. He'd go under the trees ringing those bells. Them turkeys up in the trees would think Pa was a cow, so they wasn't afraid of him. He said he tricked 'em that way.

Remembering how religious her father was, Nettie declared, "Oh! How my daddy could pray! He didn't have to memorize those prayers either. They would come straight from his heart. He could just pray until it would make the hairs on my head raise!"

"Every first of May, our little church would have a grand opening. They'd have an open house and a service at night."

"Daddy would have a lantern. My sister and I would follow him and Ma. Pa was old and couldn't see too good, and my sister and I would get tickled at him 'cause he would step so high. We would sing the whole way there," she told.

"So many of us young folks would go to church. I had a little boy friend at church, but he wasn't the one I married. First time I ever saw Frank House, my husband, was at his aunt's house. He was on the back porch shavin' when I brought some eggs by. I didn't like his looks a bit that first time I saw him.

"Latter on I saw him again at a barn dance. I had on an ole white cotton dress with a blue ribbon tied around my waist. He told me that I was the prettiest thing he'd ever seen. Well, we danced every dance together that night," Nettie laughed.

The lively music at a square dance had an upbeat tempo that sent couple swinging and twirling from one end of a dance floor to the other. "I'd get up from the table in the middle of a good meal any time for some square dancin'! I loved to dance!" Nettie exclaimed. "My two favorite songs to dance to were 'Old Dan Tucker' and 'Chickens in the Bread Pan, 'a Pickin' Out Dough'. There would always be a fiddler and a banjo picker, and of course the caller would be in the corner of the barn yellin' out, 'Let that big foot jar the ground!!'" she said.

Nettie sighed as she folded her arms and settled back in her chair. "Ya know, I can talk for hours if I am sitting in a comfortable chair," she laughed. "I told her that I could listen to her for hours even if I were sitting on a rock. We both laughed.

Bill was still sitting with us, and even though he had heard all of his grandmother's tales before, I knew he wasn't bored. "Why don't you tell about Cole Younger and the James Gang?" he requested.

"What's that Billy?" Nettie asked as she leaned her head toward him and cocked it slightly to one side.

Nettie began telling her favorite story, "Grandfather said that he's sure they boys came and stayed at his place. They told him that they was on their way to see their mother who was sickly. They begged Grandfather to let them stay. They told him that they didn't care if they had to sleep outside as long as their animals got a chance to rest."

Nettie's grandfather allowed them to stay in his barn. He didn't realize until the traveler had gone that they were Cole Younger and the James Gang. Nettie explained, "After they left, Grandfather found a bloody towel in the barn. He figured one of them was wounded. Anyhow, he knew they was the gang when he heard that they had robbed a bank in those parts.

"Ya know, I think them boys was probably pretty nice. In a way, they was kinda drove into what they done," Nettie commented. She also remembered a song that was written about the adventures of Cole Younger.

"When I was a girl, I learned a song about Cole," she said. Not sure of what her answer would be, I asked Nettie if she would sing the song. I was surprised when she said, "I'll sing it for you if I can get it started." A seriousness now came over her face as if she were Cole Younger himself preparing to sing the rugged ballad. She commenced singing:

"I am a highway robber, Cole Younger is my name, A' robbin' off the Northfield banks, This saying I cannot deny. For here I am a prisoner, Stillwater Jail I lie. The first of my many robbings I'll surely tell to you."
‘Twas a California miner which I will always rue I robbed the Northfield money. I told him to go his way, Which I’ll be sorry of until my dying day."

Nettie paused to wet her dry lips. "I used to be able to sing," she laughed. Then the same seriousness settled in her warm blue eyes. To pick up the rhythm, she began tapping her hand on her knee. Remembering where she had left off, she once again began to sing:

"‘Cole if you undertake That job, We’re sure you’ll rue the day.’" Then we started to stake out the town. There we unsaddled our horses, Then we all sat down. We took the oath of allegiance— To each other we’d prove true. I’d tell you the rest of it, But I’m afraid it would not do."

Nettie laughed, "It’s been a long time since I’ve sang that ole song. You’ve never heard that one before, have you Billy?"

Bill laughed too, "No Grandma."

I was overwhelmed. She learned that song in her childhood, and almost a century later, she recited it beautifully. I could only say, "Thank-you for singing the song, Nettie."


—Photo by Elisa Esmay

"Then we started to Texas, that good ole Lone Star state. "Twas upon the Nebraska prairie the James Gang we did meet. With knives and revolvers, we all sat down to play. The drinking of good whiskey, boys, To pass the time of day. Then we started northward with the new Pacific Railway. The first we did surprise at drying off our Bloody hands, bring tears from your eyes. "Twas on the Nebraska prairie this bloody deed was done. Oh, then we headed northward, northward we did go. To that godforsaken country, Called Minesot-i-o! I fixed my plans on Northfield banks. My brothers they did say,
Chester Deckly was a neighbor from my younger days on the farm, a life I learned to appreciate only after leaving it at the age of thirteen. Though it was well known that Chester was the proverbial town drunk, he was a fellow farmer, and Dad never hesitated to help whenever Chester would call. I think it must have been part of the unwritten "Farmer's Code." Even when Chester's calls came in the middle of the night after trying to widen the concrete bridge outside of Polk City for the umpteenth time, Dad would fetch him home.

In the summer of my seventh year, we were helping Chester bail hay. The sky was clear, and the sun was hot. I was supervising while Dad and Chester were unloading a hayrack. They were doing their best to work around me, something Dad had learned to do quite well after raising six kids. Just watching them work gave me a powerful thirst. Figuring they could spare me just long enough to grab a quick drink, I headed for the house. I knew Chester had a mean dog, but I gave it little thought. My mind was on water, besides, the dog was usually locked up.

As I rounded the corner of the garage to head for the house, I froze in my tracks. There he was, a hundred pounds of fur and teeth with no chain. The dog was a mixed breed mutt, mostly collie, but a full-blooded wolf couldn't have been more frightening. He had his head lowered, nap up, and teeth bared. A deep growl came from behind the teeth. "Nice doggie," I said, taking a cautious step backwards. He matched my step. One more. He matched again. That's when I panicked. I turned and broke for the barnyard fence. I hit the boards about halfway up and almost had one leg over when I was yanked down from behind. I landed face down with Fang all over me. I turned over and threw my arm up in front of my face. The rest of what I recall is vague. I remember my attacker's chewing up and down my forearm, then the WHHOOOSHH of air being cut followed by a CRUNCH as the dog seemed to be magically lifted up and away. The next sight through teary eyes was my Dad kneeling next to me, holding a six foot section of steel pipe and Chester running off to retrieve his battered dog.

The dog was put to sleep a couple of days later, and I soon recovered from only minor wounds. The tetanus shot was the worst part of the whole deal. The oath I made that day to listen to and mind my father lasted about as long as the soreness in my arm.
When I was fourteen I felt stranded. I couldn’t explain the feeling—it was just that I didn’t feel connections with anybody or anything. And it gnawed at me. In a small town like Homerville I wanted nothing more desperately than to stroll uptown, maybe sit on the hood of a friend’s car, and get to know the neighbors, like everybody else seemed to be doing. At the time I had no idea that it was a web of my own adolescent self-consciousness that was cutting me off from others. I only knew that every time I tried to walk up to someone and chat, that mysterious web would drop and tangle me up.

I would burrow under the covers at night in my bedroom and read romantic novels in which the heroine would have her debut—an official welcome for the heroine to boldly slip into society. I longed for such a clear sign for myself. I wanted something to relieve me of the confinement, the pressure.

I tried talking about it one night at supper, but of course it came out all stupid.

My brother said, “Hmmph. I think you have a brain tumor.”

My mother said, “Well now, Jill, you just have to give you hormones time to get straightened out. You just ignore all that stuff.”

So I tried to ignore it all, but my mind was weak and perverse, and those thoughts kept creeping up on me, and at the oddest times. I might be watching the algebra teacher sort through the impossible jungle of X’s and Y’s on the blackboard, or I might be at a basketball game during overtime, when the rest of the people in the gym were caught up in a wave of frenzy, and suddenly everything would go blank, and I would shake myself and try to convince myself that I wasn’t having an hallucination, and that I really belonged here, in the middle of all these people. Or at night I would lie awake, listening to the radio’s “...this is KIOA Des Moines...” and I would suddenly, fiercely, long to hear those call letters for the first time, fresh, so that I could believe that this was where I had been placed, where I belonged.

School was passing in a daze for me too, although a small spark in the routine was the slumber party my friend Carla was planning to have the next Friday. Her parents would be gone that night, so during noon hours we would huddle down in the mildewy locker room and shiver with delight at the possibilities of a slumber party in a parentless house. I tried my best to feel giddy about it like the rest of the girls, but still I felt like an outsider. (But of course I didn’t dream of mentioning this to my friends. I felt in enough danger already at school without having my friends think I was wierd.)

Friday night came, and we girls put into the party as much recklessness and evil as we could—as much evil as a group of green and innocent freshman girls can think of.

We loaded our games of Truth-or-Dare with juicy questions like: “If someone with a gun forced you to choose, would you rather eat a glass of snot or drink a glass of your boyfriend’s blood?”

Or, “If the Russians came and forced everybody in the class to get married to someone else in the class, who would you choose?” Some girls consulted the Ouija board about their futures. They asked what their husbands’ initials would be, what color hair he would have, whether he would have dimples. I didn’t ask any questions. I was mixed up enough without risking getting messed up with a Ouija board.

Someone thought of playing strip poker, but Tami smiled scornfully and said, “What’s the fun in that, with just us? Now if we had some men here...” Tami was not like the rest of us. She was much older (a sophomore) and much more experienced (she was a cheerleader and had sat in the back seat with basketball players when the team went to away games.) She had probably condescended to come to this party only because she was Carla’s cousin. But we appreciated her being there—in fact, we held her in awe. She had a wealth of the kind of sexual information that we didn’t dare ask our mothers, the kind I usually had to get from the Wicked Loving Lies I kept hidden under my mattress. Tami answered our questions loftily but indulgently, as though dealing with amusing nursery school children.

When midnight came and no boys from school had crashed our party yet, the rest of the girls were disappointed. They had taken great pains to let the most popular boys know about the party. They had worked up their most tempting voices and said, “Carla’s having a slumber party Friday but don’t tell anybody. We don’t want to have it crashed!” So when the boys failed to show up the girls were rather humiliated. (Were they that easy to resist?)

But Tami was not so easily defeated. “You want to see boys?” she said. “Then let’s go uptown and see them! The old boys, the ones with licenses, are riding around uptown right now!”

The rest of the girls stood tantalized with this idea. It had such a lure of danger.

Carla said, “But none of us can drive. Besides, Dad took the car.”

Tami said, “Well, we could just
walk uptown—but then we’d look
eager.” She turned and looked at
me. “You. Don’t you live around
here? I’ve seen your dad driving a
station wagon! That’d be perfect!”

Unfortunately, I did live just two
houses down. I was too startled to
speak. The girls ran out the door
toward my house before I could stop
them. I caught up with them at the
edge of my yard, where they had
regrouped quietly behind the grape
vine.

I stammered out, “I’ve never...I
don’t know—at all—how to drive.”

“But dear child! We have
absolute confidence in you!” said
Tami, swinging her arms theatrically.

Tami being Tami, and me being a
coward, I knew I was losing. I have
to feel part of some group; I had no
choice but to do what they wanted.

The girls’ baby dolls and T-shirt
pajamas were bobbing excitedly in
the moonlight. I tried one last feeble
protest. “We’re in pajamas—we
don’t have clothes on...”

“I know,” Tami giggled. “Oh
come on,” she said scornfully as she
pulled my arm. We don’t have time
to change now! We have to get to
the square while the boys are still
there!”

The “square” was the hub of
many Homerville teenagers lives. It
was the central block of Homerville
that jumped with kids every
weekend night. Like a magnet it
drew boys with brand new drivers’
licenses and old souped-up cars.
Carloads of girls would drive
themselves dizzy, going round and
round the square, hanging out
windows and looking hopefully at
the boys. There was always plenty
of horn-honking, mooning, and
bumper-colliding going on.

I had coasted the car out of my
driveway and had driven uptown to
the square at about five miles per
hour. I gripped the steering wheel
and prayed that I wouldn’t kill
anybody with this big old boat.

“I’ll go around once, just once,” I
weakly announced. “Dad might
wake up and see the car gone.” I
shrank down so people wouldn’t see
that I was wearing pajamas. The car
 lurched as the girls bounced around
in it.

I stared numbly at the bumper
sticker of the van in front of me. It
read: “To all virgins—thanks for
nothing.” I thought bitterly to
myself, “So this is the world of
Homerville, that you wanted to be a
part of. Fool.” And suddenly I
knew, for right now anyway, exactly
where I belonged. If only right now I
were back safe in my own room, I’d
never ask anything more.

I brooded over this and thought,
“One more corner only, and I can
head for home.” Suddenly the girls
panicked as a mob of boys came
charging at us with water balloons.
The inside of the car erupted into a
mess of hysterically flying legs and
elbows as the boys began climbing
on top of the car. Someone
screamed, “Let’s get out of here!”

Then everything happened in a
blur. I remember being knocked
against the windshield, and feeling
my foot being jammed down on the
gas pedal. I didn’t realize what had
happened after that until I heard a
heart-sickening crash and saw that I
had come to a stop in the showroom
of Boat Furniture. The car had
landed in the mirror section and the
girls sat silently listening (almost
respectfully, I thought), as frag­
ments tinkled musically down. I
turned and looked at the girls as
though begging someone to please
explain it all to me. “Way to go,”
someone said in a stunned whisper.
The girls skulked out of the car one
by one.

The rest, mercifully, I remember
only faintly. I remember how
quickly a crowd gathered around
the square. (Homerville hadn’t enjoyed
such an attraction since Marty
Dadd, the town rowdy, put a bull’s
head from the packing plant up on
top of the founding father’s statue.)
I remember Gordy, the town sheriff,
with his face clamped shut but his
belly jiggling suspiciously as he
filled out his accident report. (He
was used to minor Friday night
mishaps, but still, a fourteen-year-
old girl wearing “I’m huggable”
panda bear pajamas parked in a
furniture store caught even him off
balance.)

I remember the Homerville
Happenings reporter gloating as he
snapped a picture of Gordy giving
me the breath test. (All the
commotion had woken him up and
he apparently had thought this was
front page story worth getting out of
bed for.) I remember my father’s
face, bleary and baffled under
Gordy’s throbbing cherry lights.

Still, all these nightmarish details
were somehow pushed out of my
way by a strange and totally
unexpected sensation of freedom
that followed me over the next few
weeks. Oh, I suffered when my
parents threatened to ground me for
four years. I suffered when my
parents’ friends brought by food, as
the sympathetic people of Homerville
often did in gestures of
condolence when someone died.

But even this notoriety too was a
relief in comparison to having no
identity at all. It somehow allowed
me recklessness to now do as I
pleased; nothing I did would be
shocking anymore. The crippling
anxiety to impress others was gone.
It was a debut into society—perhaps
not the kind I had dreamed about,
but good enough for a person like
me. I no longer pressured myself
to lead a dull, straight life. I could now
zigzag merrily and honestly on my
way.

During study halls I reflected
sagely on the strangeness of the
whole incident. With grotesque
adolescent profundity, I compared
the episode to popping a pimple
(something I could relate to.) For
perhaps now I had a noticeable
mark, but at least I had released all
the hidden filth out into the open.

And I learned how forgiving
people can be. After the first few
cool-down weeks, Dad only said,
“Well, now, Mom says they
hormones can be tricky stuff
sometimes.” And the townspeople
(except Mr. Boat, the owner of the
store), merely chuckled as I walked
by. And I let them. We all had our
pasts.
Zebrinicus adjusted his body into a reclining position in the chair and reached for his pipe. It was a fine pipe made from an old weathered branch that had fallen from the very top of a dead tree. He was sitting in the wooded area near his cottage not far from the tree. One afternoon when a sudden squall of wind brushed by causing the dead tree to sway. The branch fell to the ground so matter-of-factly that he guessed that he should walk over to it and inspect its condition. He found the branch to be suitable for carving so he retrieved it from its place amongst dried leaves and wildflowers, stuffed it into the pocket of his coat, and carried it home.

Even though he did not need a new pipe, Zebrinicus decided that the branch was too uncommon to carve into a spoon, a spindle, or match sticks. After all, this was no ordinary piece of decaying wood that he found on the ground. He had actually witnessed the branch falling to the ground as if it were sent to him from the tree itself.

He began whittling the limb into a pipe, being very careful not to splinter the wood. He cautiously molded the branch into form, precisely hollowing the stem, and accurately drew leaves and wildflowers on the bowl of the pipe.

Lifting the pipe off the stand where it rested, Zebrinicus paused a moment to admire its beauty before filling it for the first time. One of his large hands held the pipe by the stem as he rubbed the other against the smooth wood surface. The etchings of wildflowers and leaves, he thought, were the finest of all of his works. The drawings were so detailed that every vein in a leaf was visible and every petal of the flower was graceful.

Slowly he dipped the pipe into a canvas pouch, leveled the excess, and patted the herbs firmly into the bowl of the pipe.

These were special herbs that Zebrinicus kept only for exceptional occasions such as the one in which he was preparing to partake. They were picked only at sundown on the last autumn day of the year, before the first snow fell and taken only from the east side of the mighty Tazute tree and the north side of the Rutleze River.

If the herbs were picked at this specific time and place and were carefully dried while the moon was new, and smoked on one's birthday, they would provide the best results in pondering any situation. Not to be overlooked is the detail that specifies that one must be sitting in one's pondering chair just as Zebrinicus was.

Indeed, all of the delicate considerations had been made, for today was Zebrinicus’ four hundred and seventy-seventh birthday, and he was planning to ponder a most important position.
Zebrinicaus was old, much older than most could ever dream to be, but he was also lonely, much more lonely than most could ever imagine. Four hundred years old, not sparing or giving a day, a wizard named Mordrid, who was an associate of his, gave Zebrinicaus a very special gift in honor of his seventy-seventh birthday. Mordrid offered him one wish to be fulfilled as he desired. Zebrinicaus could think of many things to wish for, and when he finally decided what to ask for, Mordrid was angered by his selfish choice. Zebrinicaus asked Mordrid to make it possible for him to live forever. Mordrid granted his wish but added one condition, that Zebrinicaus must live alone.

Zebrinicaus agreed to the condition and picked the uninhabited Malcourse mountains for his new home. He said good-bye to his friends and family in the small village in which he lived, and eagerly left to live an eternal life in solitude. Mordrid warned Zebrinicaus as he left that he should never come back to the village or he would die instantly.

Four hundred years later, Zebrinicaus sorely regretted his wish, and he longed to see a human face. He wondered often about the village. He also wondered if Mordrid’s warning was false. He was torn between his fear of dying and his strong yearning to see the village and the people in it. It was this very situation that he was planning to ponder.

Zebrinicaus struck a fire and lit the pipe. He drew deeply and immediately began pondering. First, he was overwhelmed by visions of the friendly faces of the village people. He puffed again, and for a brief moment he recalled Mordrid’s warning. He drew again and again from the pipe until so many thoughts and ideas rushed through his mind, he could not distinguish one from the other.

The room around him spun in circles, and the pipe in his hand returned to the form of the branch. The branch grew in size until it became the dead tree from which it fell, and then Zebrinicaus could see the face of Mordrid at the top of the tree.

Mordrid was repeating the warning over and over, each time louder, until Zebrinicaus could not tolerate the confusion any longer. He screamed out to the face of Mordrid, “Let me die!”

Mordrid fulfilled his second wish.
HABITS

By Paul Michich

There are no seasons here to measure the passage of time, only days, every one a repetition of the last, unnoticed like a slow breath. The sun is habit we accept. Its light fades to translucence, as we pose again for our shadows.

She says, “The sunlight warms me.”

I say, “Did we have somewhere else to go?”

She gives no answer.

We make coarse bread from dough that rises through the night, filling with silence. Each mouthful takes our words like a cat stealing the breath from a sleeping child. We are still, as we sit across from each other.

She reads story I have written.

There was a stonemason who tired of long days in the quarry and wanted to leave his four children and busy wife. Dreaming of the sea and fishes that turned to mermaids, he often stayed late in the stoneyard, working alone on a granite statue of himself. When the figure was done, he brought it home late at night, and left it sitting at the table as he went off to sea.

After a time, he tired of the sea and no longer dreamt of mermaids. Returning home, he knocked on the door, but his wife didn’t recognize him and the children threw rocks at the ragged stranger they saw. As he ran away from the house, he could see the statue through a window and envied the shaped granite that had his face.

She looks through me, showing no expression. I tell her how much I have been thinking about the sea. She says she wants to lie with her arms around a smooth cut statue and cool her cheek against the hard stone. When I raise a hand in front of my face, it is like a fine lace curtain that has liked the sun too much and lost its pattern in the warm light.
Field of Dishonor

By
William K. Burch, Jr.

I'll trade my bishop for your rook,
Don't you think that's fair?
Trade your rook for all my pawns,
You know that can't compare.
'Cause when you sat there bargaining,
My knight just took your queen.
My knight just took your queen.

On the field of honor we meet.
We've thrown the gauntlet down.
Our sabers are rattling with clanking,
clashing sound.
And while we're licking bloody wounds,
We'll plot another round.

You can't look me in the eye,
So you know I'm right.
I have my principles and ideals,
And I just love to fight.
We will never compromise.
'Cause destiny has willed,
It doesn't matter to me,
If we both get killed.
If we both get killed.

Valerie Jacobsen, artist
Dr. Raimes shivered in the doorstep and cursed the searing wind. He rang the doorbell again and thought of the warm blankets he had just left, of Kathy's fuzzy sigh as she had turned over in her sleep.

Mr. Vriesling had been very apologetic about calling him out, though. His voice had sounded faint and tremulous, as though he were calling long distance instead of from the other side of town. He had said, "I know house calls are nuisances for you doctor, especially with this being Christmas night and all, but my wife just doesn't want to go to the hospital, she doesn't want to leave the house, and she looks so poorly..."

What could he do but drive out? These old people, he had thought as he had driven out past the bright downtown section, past the proud new ranch houses with their fashionable pastel colors, and out to the old neighborhood where little box-like houses squatted by crumbling feed mills and sagging mulberry bushes. These old people just can't take the cold.

He had thought of his own parents nine hundred miles away. They spent their winters under layers of sweaters, drinking hot tea and counting the days until spring. He remembered with a guilty twang how long it had been since he had called them. They probably had waited all day for a Christmas phone call from him. But he'd been busy at the hospital all day. He hadn't had much of a holiday himself. And now here he was on a house call.

The door squeaked as Mr. Vriesling opened the door. His blue eyes looked haggard, but he smiled brightly and said, "Thank you for getting here so soon. She's in the bedroom. Let me take your coat."

"No. I won't be staying that long." Irritation edged Dr. Raimes' voice, and he was immediately ashamed of himself. Mr. Vriesling's slippers shuffled as he turned and led the way to the bedroom.

"Mother, the doctor's here now." Mr. Vriesling smiled reassuringly at the silvery head on the pillow, but her eyes stayed closed. Dr. Raimes stiffened. The old woman was barely breathing. She had the look he had learned to recognize, that always chilled him.

As he felt for a pulse Dr. Raimes noticed how the room had a distinctive feel of belonging to old
people. It was hauntingly similar to his own parents' bedroom, with the old scrolled woodwork under thick layers of varnish, the dark church-like smell, the faded pictures of the praying hands.

"How long has she been like this?" he asked.

"Oh, she's been tired-like all winter, back's been aching. But she wouldn't let me take her in to your office. She never was one to complain. Most of the time she would lay with a heating pad on, and that seemed to help."

Dr. Raimes ran his hand over the tissue paper-thin skin on her back. He moved his fingers hesitantly, dreading to find what might be there. His fingers quivered as they found the lump.

He kept his eyes down and heard Mr. Vriesling's words in a blur. "This morning being Christmas and all, she wanted to try to get to church again. She always loves so to hear the choir singing."

Dr. Raimes' mind spun as he thought of how his own parents must have spent this morning. How many years had it been since his mother had given up singing in the choir? He remembered the old days, when she had bustled about, getting her brood ready for church. She'd always rushed around in her slip, her voice wobbling on the high notes as she practiced her songs one last time. This morning she had probably...he wondered.

Dr. Raimes rested his fingers on the frayed quilt. His mind wrestled for words. He opened his bag and pulled out a syringe. "I'll give her this for now. It will help her rest." He watched the needle pierce the fragile skin. He watched the morphine sink in.

Mr. Vriesling's blue-knotted hands caressed the silvery hair. "There, now, mother. You'll rest easy now." He turned to Dr. Raimes. "Thank you again for coming out. You don't know how much I appreciate it," he said with trusting blue eyes.

"But wait a minute. Before you go you must have a piece of the fruitcake my boy Arnie sent me. He couldn't get here this year, but he did send us that..." His voice trailed off. "Oh...if he could have been here...that would have perked mother up."

He looked at Dr. Raimes. "Well, I'll run and get you a piece. You must be in a hurry to get back."

"No," said Dr. Raimes, "don't hurry. If you don't mind...I think I'd like to stay awhile."

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The Meaning Of Life

Walking back from class tonight
kept company by a
guard and a half moon,
orange red
just sitting perfect in the sky
I look in the same direction
where she lives.

And wonder if she is wearing that sweater
that Mary made her last Christmas
(because she is so good)
And I worry about her loneliness
and think, "Oh, God, if only it
didn't have to be this way:
So out of step
with life."

I imagine her laugh
And wonder if she misses me
And how she did on her accounting exam.
I stepped through the door
And as it locked behind me,
remember how she said last week,
"I love you, too, Mom."
... on the phone.

by Mary Tyler
Grandpa Was Easy

By Patricia Butin

Grandpa was one of my favorite people when I was three years old. Gram was pretty strict - most grandmothers and mothers can be - but grandpa was easy. He let me have and do almost anything I wanted, most of the time. I adored him, and followed him everywhere he went. He taught me how to play rummy and how to polish the big black Buick he drove downtown every day and how to spit, but that was only when Gram wasn't looking.

Grandpa let me pick what I wanted for lunch sometimes and tried to get me to eat prunes and gravy, his two favorite foods. Yech. I still don't like prunes. He even let me watch him shave in front of the kitchen mirror every morning before he went downtown. I think I must have been a real pain, but he never got cross or shooed me away. Except once.

In his younger days, Grandpa had been a carpenter, among other things, and he still spent a lot of time out back in his big white garage across the alley, cutting and sawing and nailing, building all kinds of things for Gram or one of his friends. After he made Gram a small four drawer cabinet for her embroidery threads and hoops and needles, his friends kept him busy for six months making identical ones for their wives. That sure made Gram mad, but he did it anyway.

Once, when he was working on one of the cabinets out in the garage, Gram went shopping with a friend and left him to look after me. He said I could come out and watch him work in the garage if I sat on a box and kept quiet so he could concentrate. But it was hot out there, and pretty soon, I got thirsty.

"Grandpa, can I have a drink," I asked.

He was sawing, though, and I guess he didn't hear me over the scrunch of the saw, so I tried again, a little louder.

"Grandpa, I'm thirsty!"

"Well, go to the house and get a drink." And the saw went scrunch, scrunch some more.

"Grandpa, I want a drink!" I yelled this time. He always did what I wanted. Why wasn't he doing it now?

"I told you to go to the house and get it yourself, Can't you see I'm busy?" He kept right on sawing, up and down, scrunch, scrunch.

"I can't," I whined, looking up at him, ready to cry if need be. "I can't reach. The sink's too high."

He straightened up from his board and looked down at me from what seemed like the top of the garage. He was six feet three, and I was probably less than half of that. But he was easy, so he put down his saw and took me to the house for my drink.

Twice more that afternoon I got thirsty, but my whining only worked that once. After I tried it a few more times, he lost his patience and sent me to the house for good. Gram was home by then, but she didn't have any sympathy for me. I was really hurt that he didn't want me to be out there with him, so I wouldn't even talk to him at supper.

I just looked at the food on my plate and managed a tear or two to make him feel as bad as I did.

But hurt feelings don't last long when you're three, so the next morning when I got up, I begged Gram to let me go back out to the garage. Grandpa hadn't told her I couldn't come, so out I went.

I ran all the way, out the door, through the yard and across the alley, but when I got to the garage, the big sliding door was closed. I could hear him hammering in there, but he didn't hear me knocking on the door.

"Grandpa, it's me. Let me in," I yelled, as loud as I could. "I want to watch you pound."

The hammering stopped, and the big sliding door rolled back so quick I jumped and fell over my own feet. I sat right down on the gravel in the alley. Ouch!

There he stood with a square wooden box in his hands. He seemed even taller than usual, but then, I was on the ground.

"Grandpa, it's me. Let me in," I yelled. "Take it to the house and put it next to the sink. From now on, you get your own drinks." And with that, he set the box down in front of me, turned around, and went back to work.

Grandpa was easy, all right, but he wasn't a fool.
The Pony

The last good days of fall
speak a warning to us
to finish the harvest
and patch up the chinks
between the bones of the house
we’ve brought the pony up
to the field by the barn
but no one thinks he'll live
through the winter

The day we bought him
when he crossed the lot
to take his first nibble
of corn from Amy’s hand
one of his small hooves
pitched a pebble fat like his eye
up at the sun

It will fall to earth
this December or January
when he goes down to his knees
from the weight of his last season
then lies on one side in the snow
a final slow breath
bringing on the stillness
surrendering to the cold

I’ll find him I suppose
when I go out to break the ice
from the water tank
his stiff form shaped
by clover-sweet pastures
and long bareback rides
next to the deep pools of summer

By Paul Michich
My dark haired, pixie-like friend Phyllis planted forty tomato plants in her garden, spring before last. We all laughed at her and made plans to stock up on canning jars. With forty plants, she was going to have so many extra tomatoes, she’d be begging us to take them off her hands.

Well, Phyllis diligently tended those tomato plants all summer, spending long hot hours out back in that garden. She hoed almost every day in the beginning. With that many plants, it took a lot of hoeing just to work around them once. When it was dry for long days at a time, she would carry buckets and buckets of water out to the young plants, refusing to run the risk of losing even one. She was absolutely obsessed with those dumb tomatoes.

One morning on into the summer, the phone rang, and when I answered, she screamed into my ear, “There’s big green bugs on my tomato plants! What’ll I do!”

Now, the only thing I know about gardening is how to eat the results, so I told her to call my dad, who knows what to do about such things. He told her to dust the plants with a powder made for just that purpose, so she went out and bought enough of the stuff to dust every garden in the county. The bugs left but the powder caused Phyllis to break out in a rash, and she almost scratched herself to death.

Sometime during the summer, Phyllis and her husband, Duane, decided to take their family of four and move back to their original home in Alabama. Howard and I agreed to use our pickup truck to help them move. Plans were made, cartons rounded up and packed, and everything they didn’t want to take with them was disposed of.

In all the hustle of getting ready to go, the tomatoes were forgotten, or so we thought, which was just as well since by then we were all really sick of hearing about the wonderful crop Phyllis was going to harvest come fall. But she hadn’t forgotten them. They were not on the disposal list.

When we arrived at the house to load our truck the morning of the trip, there she was, out in the garden, supervising the picking and packing of all those damned tomatoes. They were still green but she didn’t care.

“I’m not going off and leave the results of all my summer’s hard work! They go! Don’t
you dare leave a single one behind,” she yelled. The kids kept looking up at her, hoping by some miracle she would realize what a dumb idea it was and let them quit picking. But she just stood there, daring them to stop picking before they’d packed every last one.

Those stupid green tomatoes filled two large cardboard cartons she’d begged from the appliance store, half a dozen banana boxes from the grocery, a seven quart blue enamel canner, and two plastic dish pans.

Duane kept trying to talk her out out of taking them, right up to the last minute. “Honey, all them little things will be rotten and smelly and so will everything else in the truck by the time we get down home three days from now. Please let’s leave ’em here,” he begged. He followed her around from truck to house to car, talking as fast as he could. But to no avail.

“They go,” she kept yelling back at him, and go they did. The canner and the dish pans, filled with the most nearly ripe tomatoes, went in the car with Phyllis, the kids, and the dog. The cardboard boxes were wedged into the rented moving van after everything else was loaded. Finally, the rear door came down over the load, and we were certain that when it went up again, three days later in Alabama, sticky red tomato juice would surely run out.

Duane started off, driving the van. Phyllis’s little red car came next, and we brought up the rear in our pickup truck. Our little convoy made its way east and south, through Iowa, Illinois, Indiana. We stopped only to eat and buy gas during the days and to sleep at night for a few hours in one of those huge truck stops that seem to have taken over America’s superhighways.

As the last vehicle in the line, we kept watching the rear of that big yellow van, waiting for the trickle of red juice we just knew had to appear any time. It never did, but whenever we stopped at a rest area or a gas station, the little red car would pull up to a trash bin, and Phyllis would reach out the window and drop a few overripe tomatoes in it.

It doesn’t take much heat to turn a tomato from just underripe to way overripe, and the farther south we went, the warmer it was.

Between hoots and hollers, Howard would try to say “Can’t...can’t you just see what’s going to happen when we get there and open up that back door?”

Well, two and a half days and many stops at trash bins in Kentucky, Tennessee and Georgia, later, we pulled into the yard of their old home place. Phyllis’s folks were there to meet us. Before she even got out of her car, she yelled at her mother, “Get out the canners, Mama. I brought my tomatoes!”

Everyone scrambled out and followed her around to the back of the van, ready to tell her “I told you so.”

Duane unlocked the van door and rolled it up, slowly, in case the boxes were so soggy they might fall out. Nothing happened. No juice ran out. We moved closer to get a whiff. Rotten tomatoes really smell bad. But there wasn’t any smell at all. The men jumped up on the truck and carefully lifted one of the big appliance boxes down onto the red Alabama clay driveway.

Phyllis tore open the top and there they were. More red, ripe, juicy Iowa tomatoes than anyone else would ever care to fool with. She just stood back and grinned around at us all.
The Joke

By
Brian Askland

Pat Simons; five foot six, one hundred and twenty pounds, blind in one eye, black fuzzy hair, and my best friend. If you saw one of us, you saw the other. We were inseparable. We were always playing practical jokes on each other; for right now, he’s one up on me.

It all started one night when Pat and I were out on the town with a couple of girls he knew from Humboldt, Betty and Barb. Betty was as small and petite as Barb was large and rotund. Pat teamed with Betty and I got Barb, but I didn’t care. All I was out for was a chance to party.

After closing the downtown bars, we went to Pat’s house for pizza and a couple more beers. With my stomach full and a little more than relaxed, I laid on the floor and fell asleep. The next thing I knew, it was 7:30 a.m. Instant panic! Oh no, I thought, mom and dad will be furious. I jumped up, smacked my head on a hanging ash tray, ran out of the house into my car, and raced home where I found my parents awake and waiting.

After the basic, “where have you been, don’t ever do that again,” lecture, and an ensuing hangover, I never thought about that night again.

A month later, at work, Pat came up to me and said, “Hey pal, we got a problem we need to talk about. Why don’t we go across the street for a beer after we punch out.”

“Well, I guess I could, but just for one or two.”

After sitting in the bar for about fifteen minutes sipping beers and talking about nothing, I finally said, “Okay, what is so important? I’ve got a date with Shell in two hours.”

“Well,” he stammered, “uh, do you plan on marrying Shell?”

I looked at him, very puzzled, and said, “I hope to someday.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure,” I said, getting a little more than annoyed.

“Remember when you passed out at my house?”

“I didn’t pass out, I fell asleep,” I protested.

“What ever. It doesn’t matter because you weren’t asleep the whole time. You and Barb were downstairs alone for about an hour and now she’s pregnant.”

“Whoa, hold on, I never touched her,” I yelled!

“All I know is that you were with her and now she’s pregnant,” he said calmly.

“Surely I’d remember something like that,” I stated matter of factly.

“I don’t know, you were pretty drunk.”

“Aw come on, I wasn’t that drunk, was I?” I was beginning to question my own memory.

“I don’t know,” he said, “but I think you should talk to her.”

Being the gallant eighteen year old I said, “No way, I’m not going to talk to her unless she talks to me first.”

“I tell you what,” he said for the sake of compromise, “we’ll just play it by ear and I’ll keep you posted on what Barb tells Betty.”

After we left the bar, I went home and cancelled my date.

At least once a week for the next month, Pat would suggest that I go talk to Barb. My conscience finally won and I agreed. As we drove the sixteen miles to Humboldt, I kept asking him what I should say. “Should I deny it, should I ask her to marry me, or just send money?”

“I don’t know,” was all he could say.

I was really getting tired of the I-don’t-knows and probably would have thrown him out of the car if he hadn’t been driving.

When we got to the house, Betty answered the door and took us into the kitchen where Barb was sitting, all smiles. I thought, great she’s waiting for me to propose. Before I could bring the subject up, a tall man about twenty-five walked in. Barb looked at him and said, “Brian, I want you to meet my fiancee, and father of our child.” I looked at him, then at Barb and realized what had been happening for the last two months and that they were not aware of the twisted joke.

I spun around to call Pat a various selection of things only to see him running out the door and laughing. He may have gotten the best of me that time, but I’m still working on it.
As I jumped over the fence and rolled down the hill, I picked myself up on hands and knees and crawled to the fence line. Avoiding the "enemy" had become an art to me, but I had a feeling my luck was about to run out.

Flinging myself into the tall grass that bordered the tree line, I feared the loud thump I made would give me away. The only consolation I had was that the thump I made hitting the ground didn't seem as loud as the thumping of my heart. As I lay there trying to re-group, I began thinking back to all the times I had been scared in my life. Trying to call on all my instincts for survival, I couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry.

At the time I started feeling most sorry for myself, I began to hear voices far off on a ridge. Could it be the "enemy"? God, I hope not. I've heard terrible stories from my buddies what they do to prisoners. I don't think I can deal with being captured. Maybe I'll get myself before they get me.

When I peeked up at the horizon, I could see the silhouettes of eight, no, ten men coming down the ridge. It was the "enemy" coming right for me. How could they be on my tail, I thought to myself. I was so careful in covering up my tracks. I had been an expert at tracking since I received a merit badge from the Boy Scouts. It was getting close to dark again, but I could see from where I lay, they didn't have any heavy weapons, only small caliber arms.

How far can you dig into the ground? I was determined to find out. Only using my bare hands, I decided to scoop as much dirt up around me as possible. It would take too long to dig deep, and the "enemy" was almost upon me. Being unarmed, my only choice was to hide. I began scooping as much dirt as possible out of a soft area, then piling the dirt and as much loose leaves up around me as I could. My hopes were to be as inconspicuous as any other rise on the ground.

I lay there motionless as the "enemy" fanned out in a wide search line and moved toward me. I knew then they had to know I was there.

Where had I gone wrong, I thought. As their voices grew louder, I prayed harder. The closest one was only a few feet away from me now, and their black shirted uniforms made them all the more scary. Just as I thought they would pass me by, they stopped and used a radio that emitted a loud squaky garbled language I could not understand from where I lay.

Then my worst fears came true. I felt a long stick poke me in the back as if it was probing for something, or somebody. I very gently rolled over on my stomach and tried to look as innocent as possible. I layed there looking into the fiercest face I had ever encountered. As my capturer yelled to his other black shirted searchers of his prize, I sat up, cold and hungry, from a long night of hiding.

After being forced to my feet by several of the "enemy", the leader came over to address me. "We have notified our superiors of your capture; let's go now."

We made our way up over the ridge to their vehicles, then headed back to their base. The only nice fact of the ride was the ride itself. I sure was tired of walking.

I must have drifted off to sleep on the long ride back. As we came to a sudden halt at their base, there stood my mom and dad, waiting to take me home and convince me never to run away again.
Dirty Side of Childhood

By
John Rickey

I never realized how hard it was to "potty-train" a child until I went through the experience with my daughter and son.

My first experience with training a child came five years ago with my daughter. I did have problems with her, but she wasn't anything like my boy. The only memory I have of potty-training my daughter was the several times I came into our bathroom and found myself falling flat on my butt from a wet floor. This "caution wet floor" experience lasted about six weeks.

All that time, I would play private eye trying to catch her in the act of going to the bathroom. I hoped I would figure out what was wrong. Was there a hole in the bowl? Was she not allowing herself enough time to make it to the seat? After careful and messy investigation, I found those possibilities inconclusive.

It wasn't until the end of this six week period that I discovered by accident the answer to this baffling mystery. As I walked into the bathroom, I spied my little girl standing spread eagle over the "big people toilet" instead of her potty-chair. As I watched her peeing all over the toilet, rug, and floor, I screamed out "What in the hell are you doing?" She looked up at me with tears in her eyes and replied, "Daddy, daddy, I can't get it to pop out."

It suddenly dawned on me that she must have been watching me go to the bathroom. Through imitation, she assumed everyone had a long "pee-pee." Needless to say, that was the instigating factor of our first father-daughter talk about the differences between little boys and little girls.

After that experience, I figured when my son came along with his built-in pee-pee, that there would be no problems. Well, he didn't have any problems hitting the target, but getting him to practice was a different story. I couldn't stop the little guy from going "tee-tee" but getting him to go "doo-doo" was a different game altogether.

After months of trying to persuade him to let go of his "number two" option, I finally convinced him it was in his best interest to stop filling his pants with that "nice warm feeling." I accomplished this training by holding dirty diapers up to his nose on several occasions.

That certainly did the trick, but he decided to get even for my stern measures. On a trip to the local hardware store for a tool sale, he happened to disappear from my sight. Frantically running up and down the aisles screaming his name, I finally heard him call out "Daddy."

As I rounded the last aisle in the Home Improvement section, I was in for quite a surprise.

There, sitting like a bear eating honey on a tree stump, was my son perched atop a display toilet in the center of the aisle. As he climbed down off his throne he cried out, "Look, daddy, me do doo-doo." There in the toilet was the evidence of his craftiness. Needless to say, I quickly pulled up his pants and headed for the door as quick as possible. My boy matched me step for step as if to let me know he was growing up.

As I went through those minor problems training my kids, I remember the words my mother said when I called her long distance for some expert advice. After telling her the story of my son and the hardware store, she replied, "You think you had problems. When you and your sister were growing up, I couldn't stop you from sticking your fingers in it and writing on the wall."

When it comes to stories about kids, we all have them.
My great-grandfather Rittenhouse was a real character. I always loved to visit him when I was a little boy. He would give my two sisters and me a great big molasses cookie when we came to visit; but better yet, while my parents' backs were turned, he'd take me down into the cellar of his huge old house and give me a sip or two of his prize rhubarb wine.

Great-grandfather was a bit of a practical joker, not in a mean sort of way but in a teasing sort of way. He would pinch my nose, then stick his thumb between his fingers and try to convince me he'd stolen my nose. He'd also sneak up behind me and swat me on the rump and shout, "Gotcha," scaring me half to death. When I'd realize what had happened, I'd be embarrassed, much to the old man's delight.

Sometimes we'd go out to his garage and tinker around a bit. He'd pat his turquoise blue '56 Ford and tell me it would be mine someday. That made me so proud. I'd tell my folks that it was "my car" and in their parental way they laughed and said, "Yes, son," never realizing I was dead serious.

Great-grandfather and I would sit on the back porch and swap lies. He told tall tales and such, then he'd try to convince a skeptical twelve-year-old that they were true. But sometimes as we were talking, he'd spy a cat prowling in his garden. "Damn cats ruin my rhubarb," he'd say as he reached for his BB gun, take careful aim, and if he was lucky, sting the cat in the butt. Then he'd watch it run at full speed to parts unknown. "Damn cats kill my birds," he'd say, then add, "That'll teach 'em to crap in my garden."

Great-grandfather was healthy and fit-as-a-fiddle until the day he died. This was mainly due to his simple tastes and the fact that he preferred to walk rather than drive. I can still remember him in his hat, topcoat and cane trudging down the street. He wasn't the type to grow old gracefully - he was just too ornery.

He died while he was out hunting rabbits one day. The police found him slumped over the steering wheel of his once beautiful '56 Ford which had left the road and smashed into a fence. The police thought he'd had a heart attack, but my grandmother thought that someone had run him off the road, although there was no proof as such. He was too full of life to die like that, or at least it seemed that way to here. I never did get the Ford as his legacy to me but I did get something rather special to remember him by - an old medicine bottle full of porcupine quills.
A thread of light had woven its way through a small window above my head, first playing on the corner of a metal bench and then falling to the cold, gray asphalt floor. There it lay on square #41, dawn's spotlight finally broken through the darkness, signalling an end to a night of counting tiles. Exhausted, I leaned forward, resting my head in my hands and gazing at the pale yellow splotch as it grew steadily and crept across a crack, almost imperceptibly, micron by micron. The light quivered like an amoeba, pseudopodia pushing back the shadows.

Abruptly, the steel door swung open; a burst of incandescence shone inward from the hallway; and the figure of a man appeared in the entrance. He stood motionless, watching me. I brushed the hair from my eyes, leaned back against the cement-block wall, and sat watching his keys dangling from his fist, as they sparkled in the light from the hall. As he stepped back into the corridor and beckoned for me to follow, his free hand moved protectively to the black holster on his hip. Stiff, weak, trembling, I rose and left the room.

"You're free to go." His tone was expressionless. His face was turned away.

Thank you. Thank God, I thought as relief washed over me and my heart raced; but no sound escaped. Bundling my jacket around me, fumbling in my pockets for my gloves, smashing my knitted cap onto my head, I fled through the double doors and down the wide front steps of the Shadyside district.
In 1970, this section of Pittsburgh was the Haight-Ashbury of the city. Students, drop-outs, flower children, freaks, draft-dodgers, protesters, militants—all had claimed these twenty square blocks as their refuge from conventional society. American flags hung upside-down in windows, exhibits of defiance. Long-haired young men wearing arm bands stood on the street corners, exchanging plastic bags and money. From the sidewalks, from street signs, from the doors and walls of buildings, the symbol of peace protested the imperialism of a nation fighting an undeclared war in Vietnam. Inside the houses, the scent of cannabis hung in the air and mixed with the aroma of burning incense. Candles flickered while pulsating rock music pounded ceilings, vibrated floors, and leaked out of windows. As remote as an island, Shadyside stood apart from the rest of the city, harboring the participants of a revolution of change and symbolizing the negation of traditional values.

To this place Kate had run when the battle between drugs and academics had ended. Her mid-term grades had rendered the semester unsalvagable. With promises of undying friendship, we had whispered good-bye, and for the last few months, I had missed her terribly. However, the sadness was forgotten; for now, I and my friend David were here, bounding happily up the creaking, groaning staircase to the fourth floor. In this place, as surely as do visitors to a foreign land, we hoped to taste the freedoms and experience the customs of a subculture.

During the early evening, people came and left and returned with beer and bottles and bags containing things that made Kate smile. Each arrival and departure was cloaked in underground secrecy, with Kate peering out of the windows and listening at the door before the locks were turned. David and I grinned at each other, feeling the effects of opiated hashish. By ten o'clock we had forgotten how to walk and were content to sit, propped up in bean bag chairs, and listen to Kate's chatter about the "movement."

She sat next to me, clutching a can of Bud; her soft blonde hair fell from her headband like a shimmering sheet of gold, hanging like a cape over her tattered, faded-olive army jacket. We talked of school, of growing up, of being free. We giggled and drank, and smoked, and teased David about his "virginity." A troubled, twisted world yielded to our young wisdom, and we glowed with satisfaction, having smoothed its problems.

"Stay," Kate whispered urgently. "Stay here. Be alive; become part of the movement. What good will your education be if you sit back and don't try to stop them from blowing up the planet? Think of all the senseless killing...babies...kids like us...every damn day, death for no reason!"

I watched her eyes, flashing with emotion, and I felt her passion for this cause touch me and seep inward.

"The establishment teaches you only what it wants you to know; we're taught how to think so we reach their predetermined conclusions. Society force feeds us the beliefs that support its own structure. If you accept that, you join them in the destruction of your individual freedom. Take off the mental straightjacket! Stay!" She turned away, distracted by the movement of some people toward the door. "Be right back," she smiled; then paused, dropped two bright red pills into her mouth, and tossed her head back to drain the last droplets of beer from the can.

David had fallen asleep. I snuggled next to him waiting for Kate to return. She never did. Suddenly I awakened to the sounds of chaos; everyone was leaving; faces looked frightened. The room spilled its human contents onto the fourth floor landing and down the steps; within minutes silence replaced bedlam. Then leaving my sleeping friend, I walked to the head of the stairway and looked down. Slowly, one narrow step at a time, I descended toward the shape at the bottom. Slowly, one creaking, groaning step at a time, my stomach tightened in dread. Reaching the third floor, I sank to my knees and felt a warm dampness soak into my jeans. Kneeling beside the form, I began to shake. My fingers touched the soft, yellow hair; my arms reached out and cradled the bleeding head; my tears fell glistening onto the lifeless cheeks.

"What happened," I screamed. "Please, Katie, be okay!"

The sirens grew louder, and soon there was a man wearing a black holster pulling me to my feet. He pushed me, dragged me to the first floor, outside, and into a car with flashing lights. Soon he was pulling me out of the car, up a wide staircase, and through a set of double doors; gripping my arm, he shoved me along a brightly lit hallway and, at last, pushed me into a small, dark room and onto a metal bench. Blankly I stared at the tiles on the floor; I stared at them through questioning and on through the night.

Leaving the concrete and steel behind, the bus rolled up and over the mountains, through the waking coal towns, swallowing the miles. I cried for Kate and for myself. Not seeing the trees as they thickened into forest, my mind focused on a vision of sixty-three asphalt tiles and a man with a gun. Later, tucked away in the safety of my dormitory room, I peeled off my jeans and sobbed as I washed her blood from my skin. Kate had been right: "...every damn day, death for no reason." No reason at all.
Strained voices, closed doors
Not only those of the house,
But more significantly,
Those of the heart.
The thickness of the
silence that ensues...
all that is left,
the silence,
the remains of dreams past,
and the final closing of the door.

By Mary Evans