

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

2005

Broken lines: Mending the memories of a scattered childhood

Ryan W. Newhouse

The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Newhouse, Ryan W., "Broken lines: Mending the memories of a scattered childhood" (2005). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 5862.
<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/5862>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.



**Maureen and Mike
MANSFIELD LIBRARY**

The University of
Montana

Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety,
provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly
cited in published works and reports.

****Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature****

Yes, I grant permission

☒

No, I do not grant permission

☐

Author's Signature:

[Handwritten Signature]

Date:

1-4-06

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken
only with the author's explicit consent.

BROKEN LINES:
MENDING THE MEMORIES OF A SCATTERED CHILDHOOD

by

Ryan W. Newhouse

B.A. Maryville College, Tennessee. 2002

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Science

The University of Montana

December 2005

Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

1-05-06

Date _____

UMI Number: EP36663

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP36663

Published by ProQuest LLC (2013). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

Broken Lines: Mending the Memories of a Scattered Childhood

Director: Phil Condon ^{re}

The question, "Where are you from?" is not an easy one for me to answer. I know where I was born, and I can list every place I have ever lived, but defining a sense of place is a struggle I face everyday. I moved over twenty times, living in seven different states, before I was old enough to go to college.

What follows is a chronicle of those places in which I have lived, coupled with an exploration into my family life. In the next eleven chapters, I struggle with understanding the role my father has played in my life; I struggle with understanding the purpose memory serves; I struggle with identifying the experiences I had with wildness as a child and what influences they have on me today as an adult. What makes me who I am? How did I come from a deep-South, religious childhood, brought up by a father who hunted and fished and a mother who taught us at home, and arrive in Montana as a conservation-minded writer?

The answers to these questions are not always evident, nor are they all contained in the following work. The issues that do arise here include familial influence versus environmental influence, the fine edge between wildness and domesticity, and the importance of the outdoors as an escape.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ABSTRACT	ii
CHAPTER	
I. PROLOGUE	1
II. BEGINNINGS.....	5
III. GOLD RUSH.....	15
IV. BLEACH.....	24
V. HALLELUJAH	32
VI. MENDING THE FEATHER	45
VII. GATOR.....	51
VIII. MARK OF THE BEAST	57
IX. BASSMASTERS	68
X. DRAGGING THE DOG.....	74
XI. TOASTED MICE	96

Prologue

The water is cold, and I'm not prepared for it. I've only lived in Montana for six months and this is the first time I've been fishing. I moved to Missoula a week after graduating college with a degree in Literature. I packed my car with whatever it would hold and drove out here, sight unseen and without any prospect of work. All I knew is that I wanted to go to graduate school in Montana and be a writer.

When I flew back to Tennessee to visit my family, I brought back my Dad's fly fishing rod and reel. He bought it after I started college, five years after my parents divorced. He drove down from New Jersey to visit for a week and hired a guide to take my brother and me on a fly fishing trip in the Smoky Mountains. My brother went. I did not. Dad disliked the trip so much he left his rod and reel at our house and vowed never to fly fish again. He claimed they hardly caught any fish, so it wasn't worth the trouble.

I'm twenty-three years old, and I'm standing in the middle of Rock Creek in mid-November. My friend Chris is fishing upstream. I'm wearing shorts, a green fleece jacket, and a pair of slip-on water shoes that may as well be greased with Crisco against the algae-laden stone bed that gives Rock Creek its name. I'm essentially naked to the elements. I have no fishing vest, no waders, no net or spare line. The few flies tucked in my pocket I borrowed from Chris. My toes are completely numb and useless for maintaining balance in the fast current. All

I can do is lock my legs and stand in the same place, casting over and over again in one small riffle.

Casting is probably not the right word. It's been eight years since I've been fishing, ten since I've fished with a fly rod, and that was when I lived on a lake and there weren't any trees behind me when I cast. What I am doing now looks more like slapping, or flinging. I keep repeating to myself, "ten o'clock, two o'clock, ten o'clock, two o'clock" which I learned watching the movie, "A River Runs Through It," or I may have learned it from my Dad as he stood beside me in Lake Murray, encouraging me to keep practicing. It's been so long ago that at this moment I can't keep straight in my head what actually happened from what I would have wanted to happen.

Memory is like that—it never stands still long enough for you to figure out the exact moment something inside you changed. It moves like a leaf in a river's current. It may pause in a back eddy and give you brief visions of clarity, but it will never last. Your life is pushed forward like the water, over rocks and around bends, never at rest, its path never clearly defined.

As I stand freezing and alone, I am taken by the sounds of the water lapping against my bare legs, and by the dripping notes of an American Dipper that is bobbing in and out of the icy waters in front of me. I grip tight my Dad's discarded rod, the one thing connecting me to all of this, the very reason that I am able to stand here and fish these waters. Since the day of the divorce, I have discarded everything in my life that reminded me of my father. I no longer did

anything that he once enjoyed doing. I stopped hunting, and I stopped fishing.

In college it was easy for me to maintain this rejection. A major part of college life is about casting off the identity that your family had thrown on you and learning what it is inside that makes you who you are. The friends I hung around in college worked to save the environment, and wrote at length about who they thought they were. Recreation in the outdoors, to them, meant to "Recreate." There was no room for hunting or fishing, which symbolized the depletion of nature, not the protection. At the time, it seemed that everything had to represent something else; it was a time of extremes, with little or no room for balance. You were either "For" something, or you were "Against" it. In college, I was for Nature, and I was against my Dad.

I cast for the twentieth time in the same riffle. I am using a red San Juan worm, as suggested by my friend. I let the beaded hook drift downriver and swing across the current. As I pull the line to shorten the slack and ready myself to cast again, I am met with a small tug. Not thinking about setting the hook, I immediately start reeling and pulling the line, in no particular or graceful order. At once I am fighting a fish that bobs the tip of my rod like the body of that American Dipper. The fish swims upriver and then back down. It moves left, and then it moves right. I know nothing about "playing" the fish. I'm in disbelief that this is happening at all.

I land the small brown trout. Without a net, I am squeezing much too tightly and trying to keep it from getting loose before I am done looking it over.

My heart races. I look upriver and see that Chris is too far to notice what I've done. In heavy breath, I murmur, "I caught you. I caught *you*." I do not know what that means, or why that, of all things, comes to my mind. I let the wet trout slip into the water and it darts away.

For weeks I had dreams of that first encounter. I replayed the scene in my head over and over. I noted the irony of using my Dad's rod, of the fact that I fished without him. I had no one to whom I could show my catch, no photo to prove that it really happened. To my family back East, and to my Dad when I finally told him, it was only a story. However, it was my story, and it represented so many things that still I am trying to recognize all of them. That story sent me on a journey, a trip of self-discovery that led me to the headwaters of my existence. I realized I needed to sift through the raging current of my memories and find out how I came to appreciate wildness, and I needed to know, and ultimately accept, how much I was like my own father.

Beginnings

We usually recognize a beginning. Endings are more difficult to detect. Most often, they are realized only after reflection. Silence. We are seldom conscious when silence begins – it is only afterward that we realize what we have been a part of.

– Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge*

I was born blue. On October 26, 1978, at 1:45 in the afternoon, in a stark white room of the Camden, South Carolina, community hospital, a young doctor hooked his fingers under my armpits and squeezed my broad shoulders until my collar bones cracked. He thought it was the only way I would be delivered alive. The inexperienced doctor was a substitute for my parents' real doctor, who was away at a golf tournament at the time of delivery. Tremendous pressure is needed to snap an infant's pliable bones. The injury caused me to cry before I was fully delivered, and I sucked fluid into my lungs. Lacking oxygen, I turned blue. The doctor panicked as he held nine pounds and fourteen ounces of bluish, purple baby in his hands. He grabbed a razor-sharp scalpel and made a small incision into my trachea. He then tried thrusting a plastic tube in me that was too large for the opening he had made.

Mom was completely helpless, strapped down to the table because of an epidural in her back.

"I knew something was wrong when I never heard you cry," she says whenever she tells this story. "I tried so hard to break the straps. Nobody would tell me what was wrong."

Mom's friend, the assisting nurse Margie, grabbed me, then grabbed the doctor by his coat and tossed him across the room.

"She was such a fiery little thing," Mom would say. Margie found the right-sized tube and finished the procedure. And I began to breathe.

Twenty minutes after the emergency tracheotomy I was flown by helicopter to a specialist in Columbia, South Carolina's capitol city. From the moment Margie saved my life, I did not leave her arms until she handed me over to the specialist. When I was released two months later, a local newspaper reporter wrote an article on my recovery. In the photo, I am being held in Margie's arms as my parents, Ron and Doris, stand by her side—Margie's dark brown eyes contrasting my bright blue ones.

As evident in the newspaper photograph, Dad had already lost most of the hair atop his head by the time I was born. He was never allowed the excuse that the trauma around my birth was the cause for his hair loss, simply because he was not in the room during the delivery. As with my sister's birth before me, he opted to wait until it was all said and done. That day, however, a nurse had to tell him that his wife and newborn son were being flown to a specialist thirty-five miles away due to "complications."

For the two months I was in the hospital, the bills for my surgery and care pushed my parents deeper into debt. The insurance covered about ten percent of the bills, and the amount of money my parents were left responsible for would have been enough to buy not one, but two new 1978 Buicks, complete with

leather interior, power windows and air conditioning. In the newspaper article about my recovery, Margie asked people to help any way they could. She went to churches and asked for offerings; she went door to door, neighborhood to neighborhood, asking people for money. After all her diligent campaigning, my parents only had to pay an amount equal to buying new tires for just one of those Buicks.

It was clearly understood that Margie was close to our family. She was my godmother. She had helped my parents when my older sister, Misty, was born three years before me. She often took me to daycare and would be there to pick me up in the afternoon. She brought me presents on a weekly basis. She once gave me a Donald Duck doll because she thought my big eyes looked like the ones on the stuffed toy. One day she brought me a plastic action figure, still new and in its package. It was wrapped in brown paper and had my name written on the outside, like a Christmas present. I still have the Donald Duck doll, but the plastic action hero was probably lost or sold in a yard sale along the way. The scar from the tracheotomy I have kept since birth.

"Margie always said we'd sue that doctor the day you turned sixteen," Mom would tell me as I grew up. But Margie never saw my sixteenth birthday. She died of a brain tumor when I was thirteen and a half. At the time of her death we were living about ninety miles from her house. She fell sick and died within a week of her diagnosis. The strangest thing is that no one ever called us

to let us know. Mom found out by seeing her obituary in the state's newspaper, and by chance it was in time to attend the funeral.

"She lost her little boy about ten years before you were born," Mom explained to me as we sat in the third row of the funeral home.

"He was a 'water head' baby and only lived for a couple years," she said in a quiet voice. A "water head" baby is born with an enlarged brain and rarely lives longer than three years.

"They had a girl a few years before you were born," Mom told me, blinking her swollen, tearful eyes, "but they never got over losing their little boy, especially Margie's husband, D.T. That's when he started drinking. You were her little boy."

It was the first funeral I had ever attended. I have no memory of what Margie looked like lying so still in the coffin that day, but I remember when it was our time to offer our condolences to Margie's husband what he looked like. I remember his eyes filling with tears when they fell on my mother.

"Oh Doris," he said, "Oh God, she kept calling your name. She kept asking where you were. Your name, your name was the last thing she said before she died."

During the first years of my life, Margie was not just caring for me; she was taking care of my mother as well. Dad had dropped out of college after his third year and did not tell anyone. He pretended to have a job with a local

gunsmith. Everyday he would leave the house, leave Mom to take care of an infant and toddler, and say he was heading to class or work. Mom relied on Margie just to get by. The tube in my trachea had to be cleaned daily; the house needed cleaning; and my three-year-old sister needed an adult's attention all to herself.

Dad's charade carried on for months. Had he still been in school when I was born, he would have been two months into his senior year, and that much closer to a college degree. Instead he spent his days at the local gunsmith, not working for a paycheck, but crafting two custom rifles for himself—a blonde myrtle wood .30-06 caliber rifle with walnut inlay and a .22-250 with detailed checking and custom trigger action. He managed to pick up a few temporary jobs as a certified journeyman pipefitter and welder, but the bulk of the money that came into the household was sent from the Department of Veterans Affairs. My Dad had served in the Air Force during Vietnam, but had never been sent overseas into the war. The VA was paying all his expenses for school and a little extra to take care of his growing family.

One wintry day while Dad was “working,” a letter from the VA's office came in the mail and Mom opened it. The VA had discovered that Dad was no longer enrolled in school, and he was now responsible for repaying all the money that had been sent to him over the last three years. For a reason only he will only ever know, Dad chose not to return to the University and instead took a

job as a startup engineer with the Virgil C. Summer nuclear plant sixty miles away in Fairfield County.

Although he lacked a bachelor's degree, Dad had two years of education as an environmental engineer from a technical college, two years of education as a mechanical engineer from a state university, and three years of civil engineer training with the US Air Force. He was certified by the state of South Carolina as a water treatment plant operator and designer. What he didn't have, however, was a degree showing that he ever completed anything he had started. Without a degree, Dad would never be chosen over someone else who did have one. He would forever be a contract worker.

The plant was still three years away from coming on-line, which simply means "open for business." He got the job through a few contacts he made during his summer work as a pipefitter and welder when the plant was still being constructed. As a startup engineer, Dad walked the endless corridors in the plant, testing and retesting operational systems, ensuring that everything worked properly. However tedious this job may have been, it provided income for our family, at least for a while. The job with VC Summer nuclear plant only lasted three months. After it fell through, Dad was hired on at the H.B. Robinson nuclear plant forty miles east of our Lugoff home.

The Robinson plant had been operational for almost ten years when he was hired as a mechanical engineer. Dad was hired during a plant outage, which occurs when the plant "refuels." He supervised a team that installed protection

modifications. This job lasted twice as long as the last one. After six months, his contract ended and he was again looking for work.

With Dad in and out of work, the one thing that kept us fed and housed was the small amount of income earned from the hair salon Mom owned. Her shop was a small building situated across the road from the DuPont textile plant, Lugoff's main employer. Mom had attended Beauty School in West Sayville, Long Island, several years after getting married.

Instead of leaving us home with Dad, Mom took me and my sister with her to work, and everyone at the salon pitched in to care for us. Mom worked long hours, wrist-deep in up-do's, beehives and beaufonts. Women came from all over Kershaw County to ask Mom for the "Farrah" or "Bertinelli" look, both of which required an artist's touch with a round brush and blow-dryer.

Mom would have to say goodbye to the salon and become a full-time housewife after Dad got a call from an employer offering him a job in Monterey, Virginia. The job he took was with the Bath County Pump Storage Hydro Plant. It fell close in line with Dad's formal training in environmental engineering. He was hired as the lead mechanical field engineer, or simply stated, the lead problem solver.

So at one-and-a-half years old, I was uprooted from my hometown and set forth on the road into new territory, and it would be that way for the rest of my childhood. Whenever anyone asked where I was from, my answer was always the same: "On the road," I replied, "I grew up on the road."

We moved into a small house with a short, steep driveway in a small subdivision in Monterey, easily considered a border town between Virginia and West Virginia. Monterey sits in the middle part of Virginia where the state's border thrusts into the heart of West Virginia. We were tucked deep in the folds of the Appalachians in an unfamiliar landscape, among people about whom we knew nothing. We had no friends, no family who would come over in a minute's notice to help us out. For the first time we were a family completely responsible for providing our own support system, our own nucleus of sustainable energy. We could only turn to each other, depend on each other, love each other.

Our first step toward joining our community came in the form of an invitation to a late-summer community potluck. A couple days before the gathering, Mom was still worrying about what she would bring, and then Dad came home from work with several grocery bags full of deep-red tomatoes, twice the size of his closed fist.

"Where did all those come from?" Mom asked Dad, who could hardly cover his blushing face behind a broad smile.

"I got them from work," he replied.

"So someone brought you tomatoes?" Mom asked curiously.

"Not exactly," Dad said. "I picked them myself, at one of the waste treatment fields."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Nope." Dad answered flatly. "Try one. They're good."

Human bodies do not digest tomato seeds, so they simply slip through our systems and get flushed down the drain, only to end up miles away in a treatment field. The seeds find everything they need to take root at these facilities — sunlight, rich compost and nutrients, and of course, plenty of water.

When our family arrived at the potluck, heavy with a freshly baked dish of lasagna and two full baskets of ripened tomatoes, Mom and Dad must have looked like the happiest couple there because they could not stop giggling, especially when someone yelled out, “Wow! These are great tomatoes. Who brought them?”

We were giving our community something that they already used and disposed of, but in a new form and from somewhere they never went. If they knew those tomatoes came from tomatoes they had already eaten, and harvested from a place filled with waste, surely they would have not been impressed with our contribution, and quite possibly we would have been kicked out, or worse, branded as outcasts. But it was a valuable lesson for us, and it illustrated how our family made the best out of what we were given. We were simply giving our new neighbors something they never even knew they lost or missed, something that came from their very own ground, something that was always there should they have looked for it. In return, we were welcomed as one of their own.

Our family attended several more neighborhood potlucks that year, and we were invited to many other town functions. After nine months, we began feeling comfortable where we were. Dad, however, got a glimpse of something

he thought would be even better for us – more money – and he was determined to drag us along in his elusive game of cat and mouse.

He found a job that promised a higher salary than he was making at the hydro plant, but we would have to move somewhere different, to a place over twenty-six hundred miles away. The job was at a nuclear plant in Kennewick, Washington, working for the Washington Power Supply on Hanford's property. With the promise of more money, and a management position during the construction of a new power plant, Dad decided we were heading to the West, to the promise land.

Gold Rush

The landscape to which a child is exposed in his youth will forever be the lens through which he views the rest of his life.

— Wallace Stegner

We were dead center in Texas' panhandle when the Buick overheated. It carried our family of four and the luggage that would sustain us during our week-long trek across the country. The particular stretch of road on which our metallic green car decided it had had enough was like many other Texas roads— flat land filled with fence posts and steer. It was mid-day in mid-February, and it was hot. We waited an hour and never saw a single car. Kennewick, Washington, felt as if it was evaporating into the wavy horizon with every passing minute.

In the field next to the car a windmill was turning its blades, and the cattle migrated to a large wooden structure built at its base. Dad thought that the structure was likely a water trough. After rummaging through the trunk and backseat for every available container, from plastic soda bottles to half-crumpled paper cups, he decided to find out if he was right about the water. It would be impossible for him to carry back all the containers once full, so my sister was recruited to help him. I was too young to do anything or be left alone, so Mom stayed behind to watch me.

Dad and Misty climbed over and under the barbed fence, respectively. Mom and I watched with the windows rolled down, keeping a keen eye on the

largest steer. We were coming from Virginia, where dairy cows were as common as crows. I had never before seen such muscular cows with a three-foot breadth of twisted, pointed horns backed by a half-ton of muscle and bone. We were unsure how these animals would respond to a couple of two-legged creatures invading their watering hole. I could pick up on Mom's anxiety about having her daughter in the middle of this foreign field with nowhere to hide should one of those mega-beasts charge. In an effort to help any way I could, I stuck my head out of the back window of the car on the highway side and began to moan in a soft voice, "Help. Somebody help us." Mom was no longer worried about her daughter or husband astray in the field because she was too busy rolling with laughter in the front seat.

"Don't you worry honey," she said between tears, "we're gonna be okay."

It was true; nothing happened. All of the steers kept clear and did not seem to care that a couple humans dipped water from their trough. Perhaps they could not imagine a trough without water, as if they lived their lives with some eternal hopefulness that the water existed for them. If this hopefulness exists, I imagine it stems from the repetition of experience in finding water in the trough every day, having the trough sitting in the same place, and traversing the same ground to get to it. If something is reliable in the present it is easier to hope for it in the future. How, then, does one hope in the face of uncertainty?

Eastern Washington had few trees compared to the deciduous hillsides of western Virginia. Our new house in Kennewick was surrounded by heat and

dirt. We lived on a dead-end street, in a town built around the Washington Power Supply nuclear plant, for which Dad now worked.

Two months after we moved in, my sister and I were told to expect a new addition to the family. Mom was pregnant with my baby brother. In early December 1981, the Newhouse family welcomed its fifth member, Derek Shawn Newhouse, who was now the third and final male, including an older cousin, who could carry our surname forward. There would have been only two, my cousin and me, if Dad had been able to convince Mom to go through with the abortion he begged her for. Because of the complications of my birth, his unsteady line of work, and the time and expense of a third child, Dad did not want to take the risk of adding a third child into the world. Mom never considered having an abortion for a moment, and Dad never really had a chance.

Having children was never high on Dad's list of things to do. He preferred the last-minute, live-life-to-the fullest lifestyle. He married my mother in December of 1966 after knowing her for only three weeks. He was twenty and she was eighteen. Mom, on the other hand, lived a quieter, Southern life steeped in tempered tradition and time-honored servitude. Dad was stationed at Fort Bragg Air Force Base, near Lugoff, when he met Mom on a blind date. It was a date he was never meant to have. Originally, Mom was going on a blind date with a soldier her sister's boyfriend knew, but the date cancelled at the last

minute, and Dad happened to be in the right place at the right time to serve as a substitute.

After the wedding, they moved into a small corner-street house and lived there for four years. Mom was the oldest of four children and was naturally the first to get married and move out. Eventually, her younger sister and two brothers would find spouses and leave my grandparents, Hazel and Inge Ray, to fill the emptied house as best they could.

I've often wondered what my grandparents' home would have been like when it was stocked with young children running around. I only knew their home as an ordered, fragile place filled with glass plates, glass doors, and tiny glass figurines. I knew that I would not have wanted to live in their home as a child. There would have been too many orders, too much unpredictable behavior, too much silence, and too much violence.

Hazel Ray was an American soldier during WWII and came from a long line of Rays who were notorious for their short tempers and wild-eyed antics in central South Carolina. His chiseled face, early white hair and short stature, projected his unpredictable demeanor. Hazel's grandfather, John Ray, once bet everything he owned — house, land, horses, and wagon — on a single hand of poker, and lost. John was a ferryman across the Wateree River, which one had to cross to get from Lugoff to Camden, and vice versa. After taking a customer across the river one morning, the man refused to pay John for his services. John pulled a gun on him, but instead of shooting the man, he beat him to death with

the butt of the revolver. John only had one son, Nick, who married his first cousin and they had seventeen children; one of those children was Hazel.

Hazel carried this streak of violence and senselessness into his own home. Every few years throughout my mother's childhood, Hazel would come home from work, tell his four children to gather all their toys and bring them to the back yard. After this was done, Hazel dowsed the toys in gasoline and set fire to them, making his children watch.

"There was never an explanation," Mom would tell me, "That was the hardest part."

Hazel was one of the town's only barbers; he knew everyone and everyone knew Hazel. He was also a member of another bitterly violent and deep-rooted family in the South, the Ku Klux Klan. He attained one of the Klan's highest orders, the Purple Dragon. Of course this was something that he never bragged about, but people in the community knew it.

"It's funny how I can remember some things," my mother told me recently over the phone. "I remember the night he got that purple robe."

"I couldn't have been more than five years old. We never went a lot of places in a car when I was young, so every trip was special," she said.

"We drove deep into the woods. We were all told to stay in the car with Mom. There were lots of people in white robes and hoods." She paused. "When I saw the cross burning, I opened the back door and threw up. Twice."

"Daddy came back and he was so excited. He kept talking about his new robe and kept saying, 'We got him. We killed him.' I was so young then," she said, "I didn't know what that meant, and I never asked."

There was a photograph in my grandparents' house that sat tucked away on a desk in the den. It nearly seemed hidden, as if it was something to be ashamed of, or forgotten. It was a black and white photograph taken at my grandparents' wedding. It was kept in a cheap, mismatched frame that looked as if it missed most passes of the weekly feather dusting. In the photo, Hazel was wearing his Army dress uniform and cap. Various medals and buttons adorned his lapel and left sleeve. He was clean-shaven with bright eyes, and standing square-shouldered behind his young German bride, Inge Krauss Ray. My grandmother was wearing a white silk dress that stood out against her olive complexion. On her arm she had draped a bouquet of carnations and held it low to cover her belly, which was eight months swollen with my mother. Her veil flowed down her body and kissed the floor like a soft waterfall. Her long dark hair was pulled back. Her round glasses were held up by her soft German nose. Her image was delicate, while my grandfather's was stern. Both of them were only wearing half-smiles.

Hazel was stationed near Karlsruhe, Germany, during the War. Karlsruhe was Inge's hometown. She worked as a roof repairperson during the bombings, but before that she worked as an artist for the Hummel Company, spending

countless hours at a dimly lit desk painting small figurines. Hazel knew only a few words in German, and Inge only knew a few in English, but it was Inge who practiced diligently to learn English; she studied the language by writing out American song lyrics and then singing them. After marrying my grandfather, Inge moved across the Atlantic Ocean to Lugoff, South Carolina, to raise a family and live out the rest of her life.

Such a radical mix of blood and ideals came together in my mother when she was born. She was the product of two nations at war and two people who could not be any more different from each other. I like to think of her as a perfectly balanced seesaw, like the ones kids play on in parks; except this one is still and quiet. Somehow she beat the odds given to her as a child. She is neither harsh and bitter like her father, nor passive and stifled like her mother, and so many other women at that time in the South.

My brother's relatively problem-free delivery was not a sign of things to come. Washington Power Supply filed for bankruptcy six months after we moved across the country. In one month, the company had turned Kennewick into a ghost town. Newly emptied houses sprang onto the real estate market within two weeks of the bankruptcy announcement. Homes lost their value. The market was flooded. In an effort to create stability, my parents bought the home we were renting, hoping Dad could find work at another Hanford plant site, or that his plant would somehow reopen and need him again.

Soon six more months had gone by and Dad had still not found work. He had broadened his search and was looking for any plant job nationwide. He could not imagine working for anything less than three times minimum wage, which was still a far cry below what he had been making. For him, money was the only way out of hardship.

His search led him to a job in Johnson City, Tennessee, working as a mechanical engineer for the Tennessee Eastman Coal Gasification Plant. He would be responsible for a team of engineers, and for supervising the installation of fire protection systems in the plant. It was time to pack up, sell the house, and move back across the United States, back into the Appalachian mountains. Our cross-country treks were almost historic in nature — we moved west in search for more money, as if it were a modern day gold rush, and we moved back east to exploit the mountain-top removal process that has plagued the coal-rich Appalachians for years.

It seemed fitting that our return trip from Washington state to the east included an educational side trip through the giant redwood forests of Oregon and northern California, but it was as if we were making a mockery of what nature offered, as if we were gesturing, “Yes, I see what you can produce, but look at how we can take.” In a few million years those giant redwoods would be nothing more than a fossilized coal bed, a source of non-renewable energy to be bought and sold. It is only now, as I look back at our little road trip, that I see the irony that pervaded that time in our lives.

The Tennessee Eastman Coal Gasification Plant burned a pulverized coal and kerosene mixture in order to turn large turbines, which created electricity for the surrounding region. The plant also produced various chemical products and plastics, such as polyethylene. In 1983, the plant became the first of its kind to commercially produce industrial chemicals from coal and was quickly renamed Eastman Chemical Company, shifting its focus away from the production of electricity and toward plastics.

Dad would not be around to witness this shift. His six-month contract ended in September, 1982, and he was again out of work. With Eastman's new emphasis on chemical production, Dad's energy engineering skills were no longer valuable. Eastman went on to become a Fortune 500 company, grossing over five billion dollars a year, while we were stuck in another unfamiliar place without any immediate prospects. Tired of being strangers among strangers, we did what we thought would bring us a little security — we moved back to Lugoff, back into the very same house we left two-and-a-half years earlier. We were going to start over.

Bleach

My fourth birthday party was interrupted by a smelly discovery in our living room. Dad had bought a golden retriever puppy from a friend of his a couple weeks after we moved back into the small corner house, which we now owned. It was the first pet in our home. He named the dog "Sparky," and he was going to train it as his hunting partner. That evening, just after I had blown out the large green and white candle shaped as the number "Four," Dad came stomping out of the living room yelling, "Where is that damn dog?!"

Sparky had not fully grasped the intricacies of where he was supposed to defecate, and left a small brown mess on the beige carpet. Sparky was already cowering by the time Dad had found him hiding under the kitchen table. Dad grabbed him by the back of his neck and dragged Sparky back to the scene of the mess. He stuck Sparky's nose directly in the dog's mistake and started hitting him, shouting "NO!" in sync with every slap. Dad then took Sparky to the pile of newspapers by the back door he had previously set up as a little "doggy restroom" and began stroking him, "Good dog. Good boy." Sparky was dragged back into the living room, with more slapping and more shouting. Dad repeated this process over and over again while we all watched. This was our first pet he was hitting, but we did not know if we should interfere, mostly because we were all afraid to. We had never seen Dad like this before. His eyes

were big and his teeth grit down; he looked someone else, someone capable of physical violence. This was not doggy discipline. It was rage.

After that birthday evening, my sister and I were afraid to do anything that might upset Dad and evoke that same yelling and slapping we had seen in him. We were too young to make the distinction that dogs and kids were treated differently when they made a mistake.

A couple weeks later, Mom called my sister and me into the kitchen after she had returned from grocery shopping.

"I have something for you two," she told us. Misty and I looked at each other. What had we done right to deserve a surprise? Mom pulled out a flat cellophane package from one of the brown paper bags and held it out for one of us to take. Misty was a step closer so she snatched the package from Mom before I could make a lunge for it. Turning it over and over in her hands, Misty tried to figure out what she was holding. I pulled it down to where I could see too. All I could make out were small circular pictures of black skulls and crossbones printed on bright green paper, dozens of them wrapped in clear cellophane. They were stickers.

"What are these?" Misty asked.

"They're warning stickers," Mom replied. "We're going to use them to mark everything that's dangerous or poisonous. There are things in the house that shouldn't be touched, and you two are old enough to learn the difference."

Besides, your little brother is starting to walk now, and you need to know what he should be kept away from."

Dangerous. Poisonous. I had no idea that we had to be protected from our house. We were not safe in our own home. For the next hour, Mom took us from room to room, opening cabinets and pulling out bottles with labels that read "Ajax" and "Bleach." We peeled off the little green skulls and stuck them all over the plastic containers—front, back, top and bottom.

"If it has this sticker on it, it means you stay away from it and don't touch." Mom's words were stern. She made sure we understood.

Our home felt like it was becoming off limits, full of dangerous bottles and angry people. It made me want to be outside, playing in our sandbox, on the swing set, roaming around the small empty lot behind the house. It was autumn, and the few deciduous trees in the neighborhood had small piles of leaves under them, piled, it seemed, just for kids to play and jump in.

I came up with a game in which I had to catch a falling leaf before it hit the ground. If I was successful, I would be granted one wish. I always thought I had a perfect record of catching leaves. I could spot a leaf floating down in a neighbor's yard and would run the full distance, making a miraculous diving catch every time, or so it seemed. Other than the standard wishes of having more candy, or a new bike, I would throw in a general "Let everything be okay" wish from time to time. I was too young to know precisely what wish would solve the problems our family had. A job for my Dad, one that paid him what he

wanted, would probably be something worth wishing for, but I also knew that jobs did not always last. But maybe the next job would be the one that made everything better. Maybe the next job would make everyone happy, so that's what I started wishing for, that and a new bike.

One of my "leaf wishes" finally came through, and since I did not get a shiny new bike on my brother's early-December birthday, it meant Dad got a job offer. This job, however, would change things more than it fixed them. Dad took a job with E.I. Hatch nuclear plant near Vidalia, Georgia, and after finally admitting that no job was ever a sure thing, my parents thought it would be best if he moved down to south-central Georgia by himself at first, just to feel out the offer and see if he could land something permanent before relocating the family again. Misty was halfway through her elementary school year, and I would be starting school myself in a year, making an out-of-state move very difficult. Right before Christmas, Dad packed his bags and left Mom to take care of the kids. Realizing that she could not raise a family alone, we also moved, but not far away. We sold our little corner house and moved five miles down the road into a house on a small pond next to my great-grandma Mary, Hazel's mother.

Over the course of the year we spent living apart from Dad, one change happened no one was expecting. It was a change in Mom's personality. She walked around with a smile on her face for most of the day. She took up part-time work as a hair stylist again, working out of our home. She taught us how to

churn butter and began selling it locally. She didn't even mind living so close to her family.

Great-grandma Mary was well in her eighties and lived alone in the house next to ours at the end of a long dirt driveway. She had as much fire and spit running in her blood as Hazel did. She was tough like the dry South Carolina dirt we lived on. Her hands were weathered and hard from working outside in her yard everyday, rain or shine. She spent her mornings down by the pond with a cane pole pointed up toward the clouds and her fishing cork bobbing up and down in the wind-lapped ripples.

Since I was not in school yet, I spent most of my mornings with her. Although she did not mind my company, I could tell she preferred her own company the most. We would start the day on our hands and knees picking worms out of her garden and throwing them in a tin tomato soup can with a little sprinkle of dirt. The bamboo cane pole I borrowed from her felt heavy in my small hands. We sat at the pond's grassy edge under the one grown shade tree. Great-grandma Mary took out two wiggling worms from the soup can and followed the fishing line from cane pole tip down, past the orange cork, to the rusted hook. As if she were threading the eye of a needle, she ran the hook down the center of the worm's body and out its side, leaving a good inch of the body still wiggling madly off the tip of the hook.

"That part of the worm will attract the fish," she explained to me. "Fish go crazy for juicy, wiggling worms."

She handed over the freshly-baited pole and taught me how to swing the eight-foot bamboo rod with an underhanded pitch, casting the full extent of the line into the water. She taught me to cast at the edge of lily pads when it was hot because the fish liked to find shade from the sun just like us. I'd watch her eying her cork, bobbing up and down as the fish nibbled away the worm.

"Now he's just playing with it there," she whispered, "and that's a bite." She gave her pole a quick jerk and the pole began fighting back, vibrating up and down, and then it had doubled over. Great-grandma Mary got up from her folding chair and walked down to water. She lifted the giant Bluegill bream onto the bank and put her small foot down on its flat body as she slipped the hook out of the fish's mouth.

"Where's the stringer?" she asked. "This is a good 'un."

I handed her the orange curled rope. She popped open one of the metal fasteners and slid the pointed wire up through the bream's gill, out through its mouth, and snapped it shut. Hanging on to one end, she tossed the fish and rope into the water and tied the rope onto a small nearby sapling. For the next few minutes the bream swam sideways in circles as it bled from its gills. It would splash the water's surface and dive down deep, until finally it floated back up to the top and stopped moving.

"Still got worm left," great-grandma Mary said, "Should get 'nother one."

After we filled the stringer, usually by noon depending on how selective we were that day, we packed up and walked back to her house to clean our

catch. I laid the heavy mess of flat bodies on her wooden picnic table while great-grandma Mary went inside to get a filet knife, square cake pan and a bucket. Thirty minutes later she had filled the cake pan with the pink and white meat of a dozen Bluegills, which we took inside to bread and deep fry for lunch, usually serving them alongside golden brown hushpuppies and a glass of Coke. This communion continued all spring and summer long until it was time I started going to school.

Dad made semi-regular visits from Vidalia to see us, coming up maybe once every month or two just to check in or do some deer hunting on Hazel's land. His job with Hatch sounded promising. He was a maintenance engineer, and he was responsible for any and everything that failed to operate properly. He developed a tracking and trending program that covered every working component in the plant. When one of those components failed, he was responsible for fixing it and knowing everything that led up to that failure so it wouldn't happen again.

His supervisors at the plant liked his work. They used his model to develop further programs that enhanced the reliability and safety of the plant and its workers. Dad's supervisors started making promises, promises that he had heard before, promises that had also been broken in the past, yet they still made him hopeful. The supervisors talked about offering Dad a permanent job that meant no more contracts, no more moving.

"Are they for real?" Mom asked Dad at dinner during one of his late fall visits.

"It sure seems so," Dad said. "They've already extended my six-month contract into a year, and they said they have the money in place for my position."

"Well Hallelujah!" Mom burst out, nearly knocking her fork off the table.
"Hallelujah!"

Hallelujah

Central Georgia is home to the “Onion Capital of the World.” Vidalia’s sweet onions are revered for their mild, sweet taste and soft aroma. In fact, nearly anyone can pick one up and eat it as if it were a golden delicious apple. Every year at Vidalia’s Sweet Onion Festival, the city hosts an onion eating contest where participants are given five minutes to eat as many sweet onions as they can. The preferred method of consumption is to take four bites out of the sides, creating a square shape, and then attacking the top and bottom until you work your way to the onion’s sweet center. The summer after we moved to Vidalia, an eight-year-old boy won the contest with his record-breaking tally of twelve medium-sized onions, making front-page news in the *Vidalian* the following day.

Dad had been living in a duplex apartment for the year we had been apart from him. It was a small place that became much smaller when the four of us moved in with him. We spent our first summer looking for just the right house. We found it in a small neighborhood two miles away. It had a fenced back yard, steep driveway and large front glass windows. The most important amenity, I thought, was that the neighborhood was filled with kids my own age. There were kids my age on every side of us, kids who waved to me when they saw me. This will be good, I thought. This will be home.

Dad's job lasted through his one-year contract, and he was hired on full-time at the plant and given a permanent position running programs he designed that made the plant a safer place to work. Finally we had some peace of mind, something reliable in our lives that we could count on. To celebrate his success, we bought a shiny new red van and he and Mom decided to take a little vacation, with just the two of them.

"We won't be gone long," Mom assured us. "I promise, and Grandma Newhouse will be here to take care of you."

Not long meant almost two weeks—two weeks with Grandma Newhouse, who we hardly knew and who was coming down all the way from upstate New York. She had visited us once when I was six months old, and then we visited her and grandpa once right after we moved to Virginia.

Our grandfather had recently passed away. He self-medicated his troubled "Newhouse Gut" with too much Malox for too many years, completely shutting down his liver and succumbing to a fast, painful death. Grandma Newhouse was now living alone on a 140 acre farm. She needed a break from her place, and we needed someone to watch after us while Mom and Dad spent seven nights on a luxury cruise ship.

Grandma Newhouse was a five-foot, half-Romanian, half-German woman who had just out-lived her husband. She adhered to strict moral codes and a disciplined regimen that included a morning swim in her pond—"au naturale"—maintaining and canning a season's worth of gardening, picking and canning the

fruit from five different trees, shooting and cleaning rabbits that destroyed her garden, and heating her home with a woodstove.

The only direction she took came from the Good Book itself, and she believed firmly that “sparing the rod spoiled the child.” While she was taking care of us, there would be no misbehaving, no television, and definitely no “devil music” played in the house. There would be no more sugary cereals for breakfast; it was a bowl of watered-down plain oatmeal, a small piece of fruit, and a glass of milk. We could not leave the table until everything was finished, and we had to wash every dish immediately after we finished using it, even though we had an automatic dishwasher. The worst sin, it seemed, was to not know what you wanted out of the refrigerator before you opened, because if you held the door open for longer than five seconds she would come over and slam it shut right on your fingers. For two weeks we tip-toed around the house, sat through Bible lessons, ate what tasted like shoe leather, and stayed clear of the refrigerator. After Mom and Dad returned from their vacation, tan and happy, we thought our troubles were finally over.

“These kids need some Godly influence in their lives,” Grandma told her son. “They need to go to church.”

As soon as she left, that’s exactly what we did the next Sunday – we went to church. We spent three months of Sundays trying out different denominations of churches. We were in the buckle of the Bible belt, so we had plenty of options from which to choose. We did Presbyterian, Methodist, Evangelical, Church of

God, Non-Denominational, Southern Baptist, and the regular variety of Baptist. We finally settled on a Baptist church that held its services in a white tin warehouse on a hill just east of town. It had a congregation of about two hundred people and offered Sunday school, mid-week service, prayer groups, and a healthy dose of "Godly influence."

Of course it didn't stop there; my brother, sister and I were enrolled into the local private Christian school, Robert Toombs Christian Academy. There would be no more public elementary, no more public school buses. We were full-fledged Christian folk now, and for some reason it seemed we needed to prove it.

Six months after we started going to church, we were told of a special cleansing service to be held the following Saturday.

"We're going to have an Unclean Yard Sale," the pastor shouted from the pulpit. "Bring anything you have in your house that represents sin, temptation, or is otherwise made by heathens. We're going to turn it all into God's money and raise funds for the church."

Our pastor lived in a small blue house across the parking lot with his wife and their twelve-year-old mute daughter. He was short and pudgy. His black thinning hair was combed over his balding top. He wore navy blue suits and pin-striped shirts. He was well in his forties, but as fiery as a twenty-year-old when he stood in front of his congregation. He was not afraid to preach running through the aisles of the church, from the sides of pews, or even from the back,

making everyone turn and crane their necks uncomfortably, especially those wearing their weekly overly-tight neck-ties.

On the Saturday of the yard sale, the congregation set up enough folding tables to encircle the entire tin building. People brought everything from televisions and radios, to Heavy Metal rock headbands with the rock group's names silk-screened on the front. I sneaked over to that table and bought a couple of those fifty-cent headbands, one white one with "Duran Duran" written in blue letters and a black one with "Poison" written in green.

"Are you sure your Mom wants you to have these?" the lady behind the table asked.

"Oh yeah, she even gave me the money for them, see." I pulled out four quarters from my pocket, which I had actually taken from Mom's purse when she was busy with a customer.

I ran behind the church bus with my purchase and tied one around my head. I pretended to be a martial arts expert and began karate chopping through imaginary boards and dishing out flying roundhouse kicks to imaginary evil-doers. When I was done, I tucked the headbands in my pocket and ran back to Mom's table, where she was talking with the pastor who had come over to see how her sales were going.

"Now, I'd like for you all to come back tonight and bring all your books and music that doesn't have God's message in it," the pastor said, standing close to Mom. "We're going to purify our lives for Jesus."

After we packed up everything that did not sell and went home for dinner, we drove back to the church when it was dark. As we pulled into the parking lot, I could see an orange glow coming from the edge of the lot. We parked and Mom pulled out a large cardboard box from the back of the van. Half of the congregation milled around the large bonfire blazing in the clear night sky. Other people had brought their own cardboard boxes and were bent over and pulling out bundles of books, tapes and records. They took them over to the fire, tossed them in, and started jumping up and down with their hands in the air.

"Praise God!" one shouted.

"Cleanse me, Lord!" another added.

I walked over to an unattended box and looked in. It was filled with small paperback books and a few tapes. Whoever owned this box must have been a very orderly person, because the books were all alphabetized. I reached in and pulled out two books stacked next to each other — one by Stephen King and one by Kafka. I tucked them under my arm and dove back into the box, grabbing a music tape still in its case. I wanted to take these items back to our car and hide them under the seat. I was curious about what made them so special that they had to be destroyed. As I started to walk away from the box, a lady who looked like she could have been my grandmother stopped me.

"What's that you have there?" she asked. I showed her what I was holding because I was too afraid to run.

"Oh, those are bad ones," she said. "Go ahead — toss those books into the fire. God's watching you."

I stepped as close to the crackling fire as I could and held the two books in my hand. I looked back over my shoulder, watching the lady stare at me. I threw the books in with an underhanded toss. The paper covers began burning at the edges, and then they opened up slightly as the pages caught fire and curled. The creased spines seemed protected from the flames because they were the last to burn. The names on the covers slowly disappeared, as if they were being erased with a chalkboard eraser.

"Now I'll show you what to do with the tape," the old lady said to me. She snatched the case from my hand, took the tape out and tossed the case in the fire. She dug her small finger into bottom of the tape and hooked onto the ribbon with her nail. After she worked a small loop into the ribbon she started pulling at it, slowly and carefully.

"Don't pull it too fast or it'll break," she warned before handing the tape back to me, although the warning made no sense because she had already ruined the tape anyway. I grabbed the long band of ribbon that dangled from the plastic tape's body and began pulling. The small wheels in the tape turned and squealed. After a couple of minutes, I had the shiny brown ribbon wrapped around the bow in my shoelaces and spilling over onto the ground around my feet. I stooped down to pick up the bundle of glittering mess, trying to wad it all into one hand while the other held the tape's body. When I gathered as much as

I could, I again stepped toward the fire and awkwardly tossed it into the flames. The ribbon immediately exploded into flames, and the tape's hard plastic body slowly warped and bubbled until it, too, caught fire. Behind me the old lady was smiling. Then she turned away and left, walking back to another cardboard box.

I went back to the van and waited. I did not understand what I had just done, or why I couldn't keep just a couple of those things that nobody seemed to want anymore. I was sure I'd use them. I was sure they had some use. Mom came back holding an empty box, which she flattened and slid under the back seat.

"I can't believe I just did that," she said to Dad as they both climbed up into the front seats. "I burned every one of my Elvis records. Every one."

It was midsummer and I was eight years old. Our church planned a Sunday afternoon trip to the banks of the Altamaha River under the Highway 1 bridge, the midpoint between Vidalia and Baxley, Georgia. The trip was an opportunity for the unclean among us to wash away their sins, whether they were "saved" or not. Since I had only recently accepted Jesus as my personal savior, I had not been baptized at birth as those who were born into a Christian household had.

I, with my brother and sister, stepped into the slow current of the Altamaha and held hands with the long line of our church family. Our pastor was standing waist-deep in the river, wearing his Sunday shirt and pants, raising

his hands and praying aloud for the cleansing of our souls. One by one, the pastor worked his way through the line of forty churchgoers as one of the church elders stood behind the "baptismee" and helped lower him or her into the water. The elder instructed the people to hold their noses closed with their right hands and cup their right elbow in their left hand and hold it against their chests. As each person did what was instructed, the pastor prayed and wound up his left arm as if he were going to pitch a slider low and inside, and then sprang his arm forward, tapping the person on the forehead right as the elder pulled back on each person's shoulders, holding him or her under the muddy water for three seconds.

"Praise the Lord!" the pastor shouted, "Go forth and do God's work!"

Everyone echoed more praises and clapped as each cleansed soul emerged from the water. I stood in the hot sun for nearly an hour waiting for my turn, slowly wading deeper into the river and closer to the wild-armed pastor with each "Amen." Curious schools of minnows began pecking at my toes, and a nearby crayfish, or "crawdad" as we called them in the South, pumped its body through the brown water into a patch of dark green weeds. I lost track of all the praising, shouting and clapping. I watched the shallows for life. I wondered how the minnows swam in unison, as if they formed the body of one large fish. I wondered what made the river water move in the same direction, and I wondered where was it going. I wanted to sink in the water, mostly to cool myself in the hot sun, but also to be closer to what I was watching. I decided it

might ruin my baptism if I showed up to the pastor already soaking wet from head to toe.

"You there, come on up." It was the pastor, and he was talking to me.

I hopped along the muddy bottom, letting the current drift me in closer to the pastor and elder until I felt two wet hands grab my shoulders.

"Don't forget to hold your nose," the elder whispered in my ear.

Immediately it dawned on me that I would have to trust this man I did not know and had barely seen before to keep me from drowning. Before I could object to this arrangement, the pastor began shouting.

"Son, have you accepted Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?" he asked.

I froze, but the pastor kept praying.

"Do you devote your life to Himmma and trust Himmma to guide you into the Kingdom of Heaven?"

I looked at the people who were behind me in line. They all had their hands stretched toward me. I thought perhaps they were trying to rescue me, keep me from going under.

"Be clean in the name of JeeeeZusss!"

The pastor pushed. The elder pulled, and I was flipped backwards into the Altamaha. I remembered to pinch my nose shut, but no one told me about closing my eyes, which were wide open a second earlier pleading for someone to stop this shouting, scary man from drowning me in broad daylight, in front of

countless witnesses. Now I was upside down, looking which way I didn't really know, but I was seeing layers of greens and browns and tans. The sunlight shining through the top of the water was now at the bottom. The dark bottom was now at the top. My instinct was to right myself and take off swimming, but I was held down by the elder's hands. I was afraid to close my eyes, and afraid to keep them open. I thought I was supposed to feel something miraculous from the pastor's touch, something full of light and peace; instead I got backwards flashes of dirty water in my eyes. As curious as I was a few minutes earlier, I realized that my place was above the water, not under it. I would never make it as a minnow.

Three seconds later, I was pushed from my shoulders back through the river's surface and into the sunlight. I could not hear the shouting because of the water in my ears. I wiped my face and eyes with my hands and tried adjusting myself to air and began looking for dry land. My feet stuck in the mud as I pulled myself forward toward the river's bank. Mom had a towel waiting for me and some dry clothes I could change into inside the van.

"How was that, honey?" she asked.

"I have no idea," I answered.

All week I thought about the minnows and the crawdad I saw in the water. The next Saturday I asked Dad if we could go back to the river and explore. Not wanting to drive that far, he took us to a small creek closer to where we had lived in the duplex. First he stopped off at a hardware store and

bought my brother and me a couple dip nets, some wading boots and a bucket. All afternoon Derek and I played in the small creek. We aimlessly dragged our nets through the water to see what we could catch. Dad told us to scoop our nets in the weeds because that's where the crawdads would be.

"Whoa, look at this one!" Derek shouted.

Dad and I ran over and looked in his net. There mixed with a clump of weeds was a crawdad that nearly filled the bottom of the net.

"Nice one," Dad said. "Put it in the bucket and we'll take it home and cook it."

"You can eat these?" I asked.

"Sure, they're like little lobsters," he said.

I had gotten used to eating fish caught out of the pond in South Carolina, but taking something out of this small creek in Georgia seemed wrong in some sense. Somehow, what came out of these waters was wild, and not meant to be eaten. Fish in a pond were there for a reason; they were there for us. A crawdad in a creek was there for its own reason, one I could know nothing about.

However, I also trusted Dad, and if he said it was okay to eat them, then it must be true. After we put the first "little lobster" in the bucket, it became easier to keep adding more. When we got home, we had cooked up the twenty or so we decided to keep and ate them for dinner. With every bite, part of me wanted to prove to Dad that I was happy to partake in what we had caught, but part of me

could not escape the image of seeing that first crawdad swimming beside my feet in the Altamaha River a week earlier.

Mending the Feather

Dad's job with Hatch lasted for four long years before he was unexpectedly informed that the funding for his position had been pulled. He was given a month's notice and all the support he needed to find another job. We all began preparing for another change. We started saying our goodbyes—goodbye to the church, goodbye to school, and goodbye to our neighbors. Dad found a job with A.W. Vogtle nuclear plant, an hour northwest from where we were. He was given a six-month contract, and it came with big promises of a permanent position. Deciding it was better to stick together than live apart again, we all packed up and moved to the dry fields of Keysville, Georgia.

I was eight when we moved into a farmhouse that sat a quarter-mile off the road in the middle of two hundred acres. Our landlady lived in a small house on the other side of thick corn fields. Our one-story brick house was surrounded by four giant pecan trees and fields of red clover spread wide and taut like a picnic blanket. We moved from being in the middle of everything to being in the middle of nothing, and yet we preferred this newfound solitude.

We started a garden that spring and picked pecans to sell by the bushel in the local newspaper. Mom began sewing regularly, and we wore her creations instead of buying new clothes every six months. This, of course, had its benefits and its drawbacks. The benefit was that it was cheap to make and we always had something new to wear. The main drawback was that the fabric got cheaper

the more of it she bought, so Derek and I ended up looking like a bad acid trip when we stood next to each other. His pants would be made out of the material used for my shirt, and my shirt would match his pants, and neither of the two colors was any less dull than a neon sign. Perhaps Mom did this on purpose, so she could keep an eye on us from the kitchen window even if we had wandered off a mile or two.

The openness around our house provided ample opportunity for games and learning new skills. The first skill, much to Dad's delight, was learning how to shoot a gun. One day after work, Dad brought home two pellet guns, one for me and a smaller one for Derek. Once we both mastered basic handling skills and could knock off a tin can freestanding at twenty yards, we moved into the real arsenal. We started by shooting our Grandpa Newhouse's single-shot .22 rifle and then moved into the lowest level of shotguns, the .410. By the end of the day, Derek and I each squeezed off a round from Dad's prized 30.06, and our shoulders ached from the jolting recoil caused by the exploding gunpowder. Dad's guns were not like our pellet guns; they were tools of initiation, symbols of responsibility and power.

My favorite days were spent on my bike exploring the dirt roads that ran through the fields behind our house. There was an abandoned house I knew about down one of those roads. Derek and I once came across two goats in one of the rooms. As a child you get used to being surprised, but stumbling on two goats in an empty house was something for which no one is truly prepared.

I was biking back to that old house on a warm June afternoon, when something brown and the size of a Labrador puppy hobbled out of the clover field and crossed the road fifty yards ahead of me. I jumped off my bike and followed the trail it made through the clover. About twenty steps into the field I came to a hawk, a Red-tail, with its wings spread. It was the first hawk I had seen up close, and it was apparent that something was not right about it. One of its wings was crooked, clearly broken. The bird stared at me, hissing, with its beak gaping. I biked home to tell my family what I had found. Dad, Derek and I rode back in our '63 Ford truck to find the bird. Dad wrapped the injured bird in his green army jacket, and I held it in my lap back to the house, trying to keep the bird calm on the bumpy dirt road by telling it that everything would be okay.

When we got it home, the emergency work began. My parents turned our white freezer chest into a makeshift operating table. Our screened porch became the operating room. As they worked, I read about our feathered patient in John Kiernan's book, *An Introduction to Birds*, which I had stolen from my school library last school year. The red-tailed hawk had its own page in the book. The watercolor image of a ruffled hawk on a branch, with white and brown feathers thumb-printed with black dots and a bright red tail, was outlined by Kiernan's words. The author spoke of the great number of red-tails that are shot by farmers who think those hawks are the culprits stealing their chickens.

"The real criminal," Kiernan wrote, "...might be a Goshawk, a Cooper's Hawk or a Sharp-shinned Hawk." Farmers pinned the carcasses of red-tail

hawks to their country barns as if they were trophies, creating a hideous scarecrow for birds of prey. Perhaps the red-tail in the other room was shot by one of these angry, misinformed farmers Kiernan wrote about.

Nearly forty-five minutes were devoted to holding, setting, and taping the bird's broken wing. What my parents ended up with was a large, confused bird with one white wing perpendicular to its body, braced with Popsicle sticks, gauze and medical tape. At first my parents were pleased with their mending, but it would not last. A wing that couldn't move was a wing not worth having.

The frustration of not being able to move freely caused the hawk to panic, and it tried to fly. It jumped and beat its one loose wing until finally the other one broke free of its binding. The broken wing lay helpless, useless. It was clear the bird would never fly again. My parents thought it would be best to give the suffering animal a quick ending. Dad picked up the .22 rifle and walked out the door. He was going to take the bird back to where we had found it and shoot it there. It was then I spoke up.

"I'll do it," I said. I found the bird. I promised it that everything would be fine. It was only fitting that I end its pain.

We drove back to where I had found it. Again I held it in my lap in the back of the truck. When we stopped, I carried the bird back to the exact spot from where Dad had picked it up with his jacket. The bird did not move, only stared—at me, at nothing, at everything. Dad handed me the gun and I aimed. I looked down the mile-long barrel and put the red dot of the sight where I

supposed his red heart to be. I tightened my grip, took a deep breath, and began to cry. I couldn't do it. In my child-like seriousness, I thought I had failed — failed myself, failed the bird, and maybe even failed my father. I gave the gun back to Dad and began to walk away. I didn't turned around when I heard the report of a .22 caliber rifle behind me, and then the long trembling silence that followed. My eyes were blurred by tears and my stomach dragged behind me on the red dirt as my knees brushed the clover on my way home.

Derek and Dad arrived back at the house only a couple minutes before I did. My brother was already playing in the yard, and Dad was messing around in the back of the truck, looking for something I thought. He pulled out a white pillow case with a large stain on one of the sides. When I got closer to him, I saw that the stain was dark red and the shape at the bottom of the pillow case was oddly familiar. I asked Dad what was in the case, but I knew. He put on a broad smile to diffuse the anger already brewing inside me.

"I thought we could stuff it," he said.

We stuff it? I wanted to tell Dad about the farmers in Kiernan's book, about the way they nailed the bodies of these great birds to the sides of their barns, and that we would be no better than them if we stuffed it and kept it as a trophy. But I did not say anything. Dad carried the bird inside and wrapped the bag and body in a plastic sack, and tucked it away in the freezer chest that just an hour earlier had aided in the attempt to save its life. For two weeks I did not walk on the porch where we kept the freezer, nor did I eat anything that my

mom pulled out of there. I caught Dad, a couple days later, pulling the plastic sack from the freezer and dumping it into the trash can. I didn't know if he threw it away because it would be too expensive to mount, or if we needed the room in the freezer, but I wanted to believe that he did it because the bird mattered to me, and he understood that.

Gator

Promises were meant to be broken. Dad's six-month contract expired and there was no permanent job waiting for him at the end of the rainbow. It was the same set of excuses we had all heard year after year, job after job – there's no funding for the job, things are unsteady, we can't get the clearance, we gave the job to someone more qualified or with more education, and sorry.

Dad spent weeks calling every contact he ever made, looking for any job for which he was remotely qualified. He finally got a call from a friend of a friend working at the Browns Ferry nuclear plant near Huntsville, Alabama.

"I'll take it," Dad said quickly, dropping his head with relief. "When do you need me?"

Browns Ferry needed a project manager to supervise the plant's fire protection systems and ensure they were up to code. It was a simple project that never claimed to last longer than a couple months. Dad packed his bags and drove across the state and into Alabama. He moved into a motel room, for there was no use looking for an apartment.

The job did only last a couple months and Dad was back home by September. After he returned, there was something different about him. It was as if he had missed being home, missed the quiet country lifestyle, and missed his family. After that, he made an effort to spend time with us, to include us in the things he enjoyed.

"Would you like to go fishing with me in the morning?" he asked me.

"It'll be early."

"Absolutely," I answered. I was packed before bedtime and struggled to calm my mind so I could fall asleep.

Dad opened the door to my room at five a.m. A creeping orange light shined on my face and I turned away, covering my head with Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle sheets.

"Are you ready, son?" Dad's voice was loud even in a whisper. "The fish bite early."

I managed to tear myself from the warm bed, stumbling and mumbling toward my father's voice and the orange light with my eyes closed. The coffee pot gurgled as I filled my cereal bowl with Cheerios and cold milk. Dad poured hot coffee into the mug I had given him last Christmas, the one with a whitetail deer engraved on the side.

"You still want to go?" he asked me between sips of black coffee.

"It's early," I moaned, "but yeah."

This particular fishing trip was rare for me because it wasn't only with him. We were going to meet the pastor of our old church in Vidalia at the pond. Fishing with one of Dad's friends meant I was old enough to fish alone. He would not have taken me if he had to spend all his time tying lures to my line and unraveling countless, god-awful bird's nests that would form in the reel as I cast. No longer were the days of flipping cane poles with Great-Grandma Mary.

I was now in the company of men. Dad knew I could take care of myself and that he could spend more time entertaining the pastor, showing him the greatness of the pond.

The pond was about ten miles from our house; it belonged to an old blind man my dad befriended shortly after we moved to Keysville. The old man lived alone in a drafty shack of a house, and Dad would cut and stack wood for the old man's wood-burning stove. In return, he gave Dad permission to fish in the pond he owned. Dad understood the value of the pond because he knew it was rarely fished and was home to some "lunkers," which is what southerners meant by huge-ass bass.

Dad and I stowed the camouflage aluminum boat in the bed of our '63 Ford truck. The last three miles to the pond scrambled over pitted dirt roads. Locked gates had to be unlocked. When we arrived at the pond, I helped Dad get the boat into the water and tie it off to a stump nestled among an outcrop of cattails at the water's edge. It was about six-thirty a.m., the time we were supposed to meet with the pastor and start fishing. When it hit seven, Dad decided we should start without him. We climbed into the unsteady metal boat and pushed off. The pond hardly stretched beyond twice a stone's throw, and its edges were swallowed by swamp. Where we put the boat in was the only access to the pond that didn't sink one to his knees in mud.

The surface of the pond was littered with logs and stumps. Casting quickly became an art form. The murky water matched the brown plastic carpet

glued to the boat's bottom. The floating logs and eroded stumps played tricks on my eyes. Everything looked as if it were moving. We had been fishing for an hour when I noticed a shape too peculiar to be dead wood. Three small knobs protruding from the murky water formed a perfect triangle—two eyes and a snout. Alligator.

"Is that what I think it is?" I asked Dad. "Is that an alligator?"

"Just a log, son," he said. "That's all."

The sun mirrored silky reflections in the water and warmed our boat and skin. Heat usurped the desire to fish. We rowed back to shore and pulled the boat next to the truck. The pastor had still not shown up. Dad suggested we go for a swim and cool off. At first I was hesitant, but pride got the best of me and I joined my father in the dark water.

I stayed close to shore, not wanting to go beyond where I could plant my feet on the muddy bottom. Our white underwear was stained by the rich watery muck. I watched my dad paddle effortlessly twenty yards out and back. I took pleasure in bouncing up and down and playing in the cattails at the pond's edge. Fifteen minutes later, we heard a truck spitting gravel and coming toward us. We quickly got out and dressed. We recognized the pastor's blue truck and his miniature Doberman pinscher hanging its head out the window.

"Sorry I'm so late," the pastor said with a big Sunday-morning-style smile.

"I overslept and had trouble finding the place."

"They weren't biting anyway," Dad said with his own forced smile.

The pastor let his dog out of the truck and it immediately ran down to the patch of cattails. As we all turned to look at each other again, taking our attention off the dog, a croaking roar, thunderous splash and ferocious barking arose behind us. Dad and the pastor ran toward the pond and I ran for the truck, hopping into the bed. From my vantage point I could see the pastor calling for his dog and the cattails bending and snapping. At the water's edge, I saw the gaping mouth of a ten-foot alligator. It moaned and hissed at the annoying, yipping dog. Without hesitation, the pastor ran for his dog and picked it up, seconds before the alligator could make a lunge at them.

My mind replayed the last two minutes over and over. We were just there. We were in the water with that powerful animal. I did see an alligator. It was right there. We were right there. I looked to Dad. He was putting his tackle box in the boat. His eyes were everywhere. He finally looked up at me.

"Dad," I said to him, "that thing could have..."

"I know, son," he said quietly, "I know."

The months Dad was out of work did not seem to bother him, as far as I could tell. We finally had him around so we could ask questions, go fishing, and go hunting, and the best part of it all was that he did not seem to mind having us with him. It was just the five of us out there, and because we were so far removed from town, we were not actively involved with any church. My sister

and I, however, were enrolled in the nearest private Christian school to counterbalance our family's backsliding.

Every weekend we visited the nearest gas station, which also served as the town's movie rental store. There we rented a VCR and three movies: a comedy, a drama, and a children's flick. Once we rented a PG-13 film that looked like a spin-off of "Jaws," and somewhere in the middle of the movie it showed a woman's bare breasts and buttocks. Dad didn't think it was horrible, but Mom convinced him to take the movie back to the store, and with her by his side, he demanded that such a film either be removed from the store or clearly labeled "XXX." Perhaps the downside to living in the Eden we created for ourselves during that time was the feeling that we had to protect it more vehemently from worldly influences.

Regardless, reality would soon set in, and our Eden would succumb to mounting debt and unpaid bills, and work would have to be found. The phone rang early one morning, and Dad was offered a job with another Vogtle plant near Augusta, Georgia, not very far from where we were already living. But this time there was no question; we were all moving together.

Mark of the Beast

We settled into a typical neighborhood subdivision—a dead-end road marked by an ornate wooden sign at its entrance that read “Misty Woods.” Our house was the largest we had lived in so far, a tri-level home with an in-ground pool in the back yard. Most of the houses in the neighborhood were on the same side of the street, and each yard was divided from the next by a strip of pine trees at least ten yards thick. Our house was next to a vacant wooded lot that kept a small, seasonal creek. The woods behind our house stretched farther than any of us dared to venture beyond, so I never knew their limits.

The day after we moved in, Derek and I started cutting trails through the woods beside our house. At first they were just walking trails, but it wasn’t long before we polished them into bike trails, which meant cutting down every stump and digging out every dangerous rock.

After a month, and since we were back in the civilized world, we fell into the “church on Sunday” routine. We tried about four different ones before we found a Church of God that offered something a little more forgiving than the Baptist churches we were used to. With work, play, and God taken care of, only one thing remained with which we had to deal. We needed to find a school.

Derek had the hardest time adjusting to new school environments. Misty did fine wherever she went, and I did what I could to make the best of my situation. There were not any private schools nearby that interested my parents,

and public schools never sat well with any of us, so Mom started asking around for suggestions.

“So you just teach them at home, all by yourself?” Mom asked as she held the phone to her ear. “And it’s legal?”

She was talking to our Aunt Cathy, who had married Mom’s brother, Rickey. Their children, our cousins Jeremy and Darryl, had been my closest friends since I was old enough to know how to play. They still lived in Lugoff, South Carolina, less than a mile from my grandparents. Uncle Rickey was on his second marriage and a recovering alcoholic. He found his sobriety thanks to his loving wife, Cathy, and to living a well-ordered, Godly lifestyle. Our family was very familiar with living within churchly parameters, but we were in awe of the discipline my cousins had to live under — only G-rated movies were allowed in the house and they must have been rented from the local public library, the only television station to be watched was TBN (Trinity Broadcasting Network), and any conduct not in line with the Good Book was dealt with Old Testament style, which usually included a switch. My cousins were even allowed to mete out a little “eye for an eye” Biblical justice. For instance, if Jeremy hit Darryl on the arm, Rickey gave Darryl permission to strike Jeremy in the exact same spot, just as hard as he had been hit.

Aunt Cathy was experimenting with something fairly uncommon at that time in the late eighties, but it was something that was beginning to gain popularity. It was a new wave of education — home-schooling — and it was

especially designed for children in God-fearing Christian households. It allowed ill-adjusted children to be completely withdrawn from the public eye and be borderline smothered by their mothers. At least, that's how I first saw it. Derek was the first in our family to sign up, and then Misty followed. It wasn't until the following year that I decided to shun the school systems and turn all my class work into "homework." Home-schooling made the adjustment period easier should we have to move again, which we pretty much counted on by that time, and I saw it as a way to spend more time outside, which is where I really wanted to be anyway.

Classes started around nine in the morning and went until lunchtime. Derek, Misty and I staked out different territories around the house in which we could do our work. We rarely wanted to share the kitchen table. If we did, there was only room for two, one at either end and each being careful that the other did not cross the imaginary line in the middle. Mom spent most of her time with Derek, but came around often enough to ensure that Misty and I were spending those three hours learning, not daydreaming.

As a nine-year-old home-schooled kid, I did my best to befriend anyone close to my age. I had my weekly roller-skating outing with other home-schooled children, but they were shy and awkward and were never around enough to serve as comrades. I mostly hung out with my brother or a couple kids in our small subdivision near Augusta, Georgia. On a late-September

afternoon, after school let out for the rest of the neighborhood kids, I invited my neighbor, Clay, over to hunt squirrels, my favorite prey, in our back yard.

Clay was two years older than me and tough. I looked up to him in a strange way. He had an older brother who could drive, or at least he was licensed to drive. Late at night the older brother raced his Mustang GT up and down the neighborhood street, screeching and squealing tires until the cops were called.

Clay had been over several times before that afternoon, and we would practice shooting my pellet gun at aluminum cans. I never sensed that Clay really liked hanging out with me, and that afternoon was no different. We set up cans and shot at them from my back porch. I only had one gun, so we took turns. Each pellet had to be loaded by hand. The gun had to be pumped ten times for maximum power. Dad attached a scope on the top, which had to be adjusted periodically.

After target practice Clay and I set out in the woods behind my house to hunt. We had walked for an hour, taking pop shots at a couple squirrels as they scurried up trees and leapt from limb to limb. However, I had a secret weapon with me that day to make it a little easier. She was about four years old, with blonde hair, and full of energy. My dog, Pumpkin, was a terrier/chow mix. Anytime I said the word "squirrel" in her presence, she looked up into the trees with ears cocked. There was no better partner to have on these trips than her.

She knew how squirrels thought and where I needed them to be in order to get a clean shot.

There were few squirrels out that day. Evening was setting in and we began making our way back to the house. When we were in eyesight of the backyard, we jumped a squirrel that had been foraging on the ground. It ran up a large tree and froze on the opposite side. Pumpkin knew exactly what to do. She ran around the tree and began barking, scaring the squirrel around to our side. I happened to be carrying the gun when we jumped the squirrel.

As I aimed to shoot, Clay yelled out, "Let me have it. I want to shoot it."

"No," I said, "I've got it in my sights."

Before I could squeeze off a round, I felt a sharp pain in my side and stomach that caused me to double over and drop the gun on the ground. Clay had punched me. It took me a minute to stand up straight and realize what had happened. By that time Clay had grabbed the gun and was aiming it near the ground. I had never been hit like that before, hard and out of anger, and it startled me.

"I guess since you didn't let me shoot the squirrel," he said, "I'll have to shoot your dog."

Without fully understanding what he threatened, only knowing that whatever he said was bad and that he meant it, I moved in a blur and raised my right leg with precision and force and landed it square in his stomach. Luckily, the gun dropped. I had never been in a fight. I had no idea what to do. I only

knew that the fight was starting, not ending. Clay threw punches at me, and I threw them at him. No place was off limits – the face, the back, between the legs. I was scared and excited. I was in over my head, but I had no time to think how I could get out. It was easy to understand why this fight started, but I had no clue how it would end. But somehow it did. To this day, I don't know why. There was no clear victor. We both just stopped. Clay went back to his house and I picked up my gun, called for my dog, and went back to mine.

Clay and I never played together after that, and Dad was so furious by what had happened, he enrolled Misty and me into self-defense classes at the YMCA. We signed up for Aikido, a purely defensive form of combat. Dad wanted us to be ready should Clay, or anyone else, tried to provoke a rematch. Misty and I studied Aikido for three months. Near the end of one of the sessions, Mom came in the classroom early before the class had ended. We gave a ritual bow to our sensei and then turned and bowed to an 8x10 black-and-white photo of Uyshiba O'Sensei the founder of Aikido.

"That's idolatry," Mom explained to us on the ride home, "and it goes against the Bible. I don't feel comfortable with you all bowing to that picture."

The next week, Mom told our sensei that she would not allow us to worship that photograph. We could bow to him, but not the photo, and that's exactly what we did. But it made us feel out of place, like we were missing something, or perhaps missing everything. Misty and I decided we no longer

wanted to take lessons. We convinced our parents that we had learned enough to defend ourselves if we needed to in the future.

Clay would never bother me again, mainly because I wouldn't be around him for much longer. Dad came home from work one Friday with that look on his face we had seen many times before. It was time to start looking for work again. What followed during the year was a string of whirlwind moves, the shortest of which kept us in place for only four weeks.

Since we could no longer afford the house we were living in, we moved back to Lugoff into a small house which my grandfather owned. It was left to him after a friend of his passed away. Although this gave me more time with my cousins, Jeremy and Darryl, it also meant more time with my Aunt and Uncle. Mom started hosting Bible study sessions at the house, and one evening all the kids were called in to watch a four-hour miniseries about the "Rapture." The series terrified us. We started believing that at any moment we would be zipped up to Heaven, or worse, we would be the ones left behind and would have choose whether we wanted the "Mark of the Beast" or to have our heads chopped off in the name of God. This was too much for a ten-year-old to handle.

My aunt and uncle's extreme views caused many heated discussions between Mom and Dad. Mom began swaying toward her brother's conservative viewpoints, while Dad was losing hope in the power of the Almighty because he couldn't even be blessed with a dependable job and had to watch his family

suffer because of it. There were many nights Dad left in a rage and stayed in a nearby hotel. Dad eventually forbid my aunt and uncle to come in our house again, so Mom began taking us over to their house. Every night we went to bed to sounds of cursing and yelling about God's greatness booming from the kitchen table.

When Dad's next job offer came from Beaver Valley nuclear plant, outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, he was more than willing to move there alone under the guise of "checking it out." When it looked like it was a stable offer, we packed up and joined him. We rented a two-bedroom apartment overlooking the polluted Ohio River.

We lived there for six weeks, and then Dad lost the job. We moved back into the same house in Lugoff for another month, and Dad got another job with Vogtle in Vidalia. We packed up and moved back down there, less than a mile from where we had lived two years earlier.

As it had been for us before, living in Vidalia was synonymous with going to church. Our old church had split up during our absence because the preacher had been prosecuted for sexually assaulting his mute daughter.

We soon found a non-denominational service, but Dad grew tired of the sermons and disagreed with Mom's conservative belief. He started going to a different church, one we never visited. Sundays became divided into two destinations, Dad's church and our church. Our church offered a private school for its members. Mom was becoming worried about two things: sporadic income

and the social development of her children. While home-schooling had been advantageous for us during all the moves, Mom was worried that we were not making any friends, and she wanted to get out and work a little too.

I spent the second half of my sixth grade year in private school, and Mom started a local classifieds newspaper, *The Thrifty Nickel*. Neither of us would last very long in what we were doing. Derek could not make the transition into a crowded classroom. The home-schooling hook had been set too deeply in him at an early age. Misty took well to the classroom environment, and I tried.

Mom's newspaper took off, which ultimately caused her to leave it. There was too much work for her to handle, even with a business partner. She sold her half of the business and returned to teaching Derek at home. By the time summer break rolled around for me and Misty, we were ready to exchange the classroom for the living room. Home-schooling gave us lives that we created; for us, it was the ultimate freedom. We withdrew from the private school and picked up with home-schooling the next year.

Our house in Vidalia had a pool in the backyard, useful for fighting off those sticky deep-South summers. It was also useful for collecting friends. Chlorinated water breeds best friends. Water also attracts bugs, and bugs attract bats. During my nighttime swims, I often laid face-up on a float and watched the bats as they skimmed along the ground and swooped in the air catching cicadas with miraculous agility. I quickly figured out that I could throw small objects in the air and the bats would seize them.

Over the course of several evenings, the objects I threw grew larger, until I was tossing fist-sized water balloons into the night sky and have the bats pop them with their razor-sharp teeth. With the control I felt I had over the flying mammals, I concocted a scheme to catch one of them. I used our long pool net and a small piece of pine bark. I tossed the bark as high I could and then swung the net up as if I were striking a tennis ball with a racket. I was surprised that it only took a couple of tries before I knocked one of the bats to the ground. It laid on the ground, wings spread and pointy teeth glistening. Although it was stunned, it tracked my movement with its black eyes as I crept closer to it. Common sense and curiosity never made good bed fellows, and I fought the urge to pick it up. I had heard Mom say many times that bats carry rabies, and though I did not fully understand what rabies was, I understood the part about "foaming at the mouth" and that did not seem like something I wanted to do, so I let the stunned animal be.

A tinge of guilt ran through me for what I did. I had pulled something out of its place and brought it to where it did not belong. I suppose I envied the bat because it had a place in which it belonged, and I did not. Every time I moved into a new room, in a new house, in the middle of a new neighborhood, I was swatted down with a giant metaphorical net and left dazed, unsure of where I was. For the moment, I was in Vidalia, in my backyard, but barely before I had time to regain my senses, that dreadful Friday afternoon came when Dad walked

in the front door with the same drowning look on his face that meant no more job.

Bassmasters

William Murray built a damn across South Carolina's Saluda River in 1930. At the time, it was the largest earthen damn ever built, and it created Lake Murray, with over five hundred miles of shoreline and seventy-eight square miles of water.

Next in line for our succession of moves was Chapin, South Carolina, a sleepy town a couple miles north of Lake Murray. Dad had gotten another job with VC Summers, the same company that gave him a start in the nuclear field when he was in college. Even though he brought over a decade of engineering experience to the table, his work assignment carried little more weight than what he had done as a rookie. He walked the plant, floor by floor, looking for and solving operational problems. There was nothing cutting edge about his daily routine. Dad never received an invitation to the top-level meetings where the "brain trust" cooked up big plans to increase efficiency or reduce toxic byproducts. Dad was a laborer who jumped from orchard to orchard as the seasons changed.

As tough as it must have been on him at work, living on lakefront property suited him well, as it did with all of us.

"We finally get a reward for all the moving we've done," he told us time and again over dinner, looking out the window toward the lake. His glistening playground waited for him; it was there when he got home in the evening and

there for him on the weekends. We kept our fishing rods and reels rigged and stood them up by the back door. Lake Murray teemed with giant catfish, striper (striped bass), and tasty crappie, and we wanted to catch them all.

Home-schooling became a dreaded chore. Derek and I counted the minutes until we could leave the house and climb in Dad's aluminum boat to explore nearby coves. Standard reading in our household was no longer the Bible, for the Good Book had been overtaken by the Bassmasters Master Catalogue. Derek, Dad, and I knew exactly which of the two-hundred glossy pages to turn to when we wanted to present an item from our wish lists. Each of us had our own method of marking the important, expensive toys in the catalogue. Dad dog-eared his pages, something I could never bring myself to do no matter what book I was reading. Derek drew a five-point star next to the picture of what he wanted, and I circled the entire description, price and all, with a black pen or marker.

At least every other weekend, we made a "guy's" trip to Wal-Mart to stock up on line and lures. It was a constant and exciting battle to use the latest, greatest gimmick for seeking out big "lunkers." We got most excited about fishing for striper, primarily because they were easy to catch if you boated out to the visible shad runs, which created a fine mist a foot off the water. The mist was caused by thousands of small shad, the biggest of which measuring only four inches, feeding on bugs at the water's surface. These runs could pop up at any moment and disappear just as quickly. Striper followed the runs and gorged

themselves on as many shad as they desired. We usually caught one bass for every two casts, and every one of them fought hard.

By trial and error, we lucked on a miraculous lure that striper found irresistible. Our two-inch magic wand held two treble hooks, one attached to the belly of the shiny yellow and green body and one attached to its tail. A clear plastic spoon under its mouth caused the lure to dive down ten feet and wiggle like a wounded shad as we reeled it in through the water. Other fisherman saw the success we were having and inevitably asked what we were using. Dad kept a beat up silver spoon-shaped lure at the top of his tackle box for just such questions. He pulled it out and dangled it between his forefinger and thumb.

"Just this old thing," he said with a shrug. Derek and I sat in the boat, giggling at Dad's blatant lie.

"If they've got the balls to ask that," he told us, throwing the spoon back in the box, "I've got the balls to tell them to use this. Now don't you boys ever let anybody know about our secret weapon, ya hear."

The clerks in the Wal-Mart sporting goods department gave us strange looks when we dumped on their counters every one of our secret lures that hung on their racks. We bought them all for two reasons: one, because we occasionally lost a couple in battles, and two, so no one else could buy them. It was the price Dad was willing to pay to keep our secret safe.

Fishing kept me and Derek in our Dad's company for hours, often just sitting next to him in the boat. Fishing was an activity more communal than

hunting had been for us, mainly because of the proximity we shared to one another. We often split up to cover more ground when we went. Fishing also gave my brother and me a chance to ask Dad questions, and it offered opportunities to teach us new skills. Certain rods and reels required extensive casting lessons, and many different lures had to be fished with specific techniques. Derek and I were getting our fishermen's education.

One morning, as Dad and I walked down to the shore, we found two large white foam blocks, commonly used in the construction of floating docks. They had washed ashore in our yard. Dad looked them over and tested their buoyancy.

"Yep, these will work fine," he told me.

"For what?" I asked.

"We'll have to find one more like these, but we can get a plywood board and make a boat for you."

Immediately, I wanted to cancel our planned fishing trip and start looking for that third block. After a couple days of searching, we found one in a small uninhabited cove. We tied our anchor rope around it and hauled the heavy foam block across the water and back to the house.

At the lumber yard, Dad and I picked out all the materials we needed—a marine-grade plywood board, four 2x4s, and twenty-five feet of two-inch red webbing. We spent the next Saturday nailing a frame around the plywood board and strapping the foam blocks to the bottom. We cut the front ends at an angle

to help it glide through the water. For a seat we screwed down one of Dad's hunting stool buckets that had a swivel top. I attached a rod holder to one of the sides and rigged up two marine lights, one on the front and one on the back. We tested it on the water, paddling around our dock with two oars. It was a success, but it needed some kind of motor. I dug around our landlords storage shed in the front yard. He used the rusted tin building mostly for storing the lawn mower. Tucked in the back corner stood a green and white, foot-controlled trolling motor that looked like it was at least ten years old. The propeller had been busted, but it was easily replaceable. I decided to borrow the motor, without permission, for my new boat.

"I don't imagine he'd miss it," Dad replied when he found out what I had done.

After taking everyone in my family for a few short joyrides, I grabbed my tackle box and rods and headed out on the water alone. The hand-made boat kept amazingly stable, even in choppy waters. I rode back into the narrowest coves, ones unreachable in Dad's aluminum boat. I worked the wooded banks like a pro. The quiet precision the trolling motor gave me opened a new door to fishing. Now, when Derek, Dad and I went fishing, I took my boat while they used Dad's.

When I fished from my boat, I felt I had achieved some rite of passage. Having my own boat meant I was trusted to be alone on the water and skilled enough as an angler that I did not need Dad around to guide me. To others in

my family, the boat may have been a trivial thing; to Dad perhaps it was just a Saturday well spent with his son, but to me it was my first break into manhood. I could now set the boundaries between me and my family. It also meant that I was responsible for the success of my fishing trips. If I did well, it was because I chose the right spot or right bait; if I did poorly, there was nothing else to blame but my own choices. These were important lessons for a twelve-year-old to learn.

I rarely fish in lakes or ponds anymore. There's too much open water, too much exposure. My childhood boat eventually got so waterlogged that we had to take it apart and throw it away. We moved off the lake before we could build another one.

Today, the rivers keep me company, and I can fish them alone. Fishing is no longer something I rush; it now teaches me patience. On most days, I don't keep count of what I've caught, and I keep very few fish I catch, and none from the rivers. The fish I keep come from stocked ponds. I figure, since a human being has put them in there, a human can take them out.

When I hold my rod and cast, I get the feeling I have been fishing the same great body of water all my life, just with different people by my side.

Dragging the Dog

The move to east Tennessee happened slowly. Dad took a job with TVA's Watts Bar Nuclear Power Plant, located just south of the Watts Bar Reservoir on the Tennessee River. The plant had just finished its twenty-three year construction period and was about to open up for the first time commercially. Dad was hired to help it get off the ground. It was the first time Dad's job paid for workers to come to our house and pack and load everything we owned into two semi-trucks.

After the moving trucks came to pick up the two trailers, we loaded suitcases with clothes and toys and climbed into our tan Cadillac and drove northwest. We arrived in the small town of Sweetwater, Tennessee, late that night. We checked into our double-rooms and went to bed. We had a big day to prepare for. We had to find a new place to live.

When I woke the next morning I saw my parents pouring over classified ads for rentals. Immediately there was a disagreement.

"We can't afford a place like that," Mom said sternly, but with an undertone of hope that we could. "You haven't even started your job."

"But this job looks promising, and it pays good," Dad replied with a smile that left little room for negotiation.

This silent, sporadic argument would carry on for three weeks, while we continued to live in the two rooms of the hotel. We counted ourselves fortunate,

however, because the hotel was next to two places that eased everyone's minds – the local Cracker Barrel restaurant and the state's largest flea market. Three meals a week were devoted to the trek across the parking lot and feasting on chicken-fried steak, baked apples and hash browns, a meal served at breakfast and dinner. Cracker Barrels were icons of home-style cooking and always served our family during long road trips or when moving from state to state. Entering the restaurant through their gift shop was a great marketing strategy – keep the candy and toys low for the kids and the woven afghans and noisy figurines on higher shelves for the adults with the cash. Every restaurant was the same, and had the same merchandise, same quaint feel, same grits, gravy and biscuits. The familiar creak of the rocking chairs lined out front and brown wood siding became a staple in our family. We could leave the road behind us when we sat playing checkers by the stone fireplace, waiting for the waitress to bring out comfort food for five.

On Saturdays and Sundays we drove to the top of the hill next to the hotel to shop at Sweetwater's Fleas Unlimited flea market. Three tin-sided buildings formed the used goods Mecca. Over 500 vendors showed up weekly to sell anything from typical yard sale leftovers to bulk boxes of packaged, collectible racing cars. Infomercial-style orators pitched their goods on unwary bystanders.

"NEVER SHARPEN YOUR KNIVES AGAIN!" one young man shouted.

"Look how this brings a shine to your pocket change, and imagine what it

can do for your precious silver at home!" a white-haired man yelled from behind his blue-draped folding table.

Their honed advertising skills were not lost on my parents. We carried a box of miracle blades back to the hotel the first weekend and the famous polishing compound on the second weekend.

A trip to the flea market took five to six hours each day it was open. I never grew tired of looking over what people had to offer. I worked the tables over systematically. In fact, I was so meticulous about my wanderings my parents would let me go unattended because they could gauge when and where I would be if they needed to find me. With no one by my side, I could budget my allowance and decide if I needed to save, spend, or go back to Mom or Dad and ask for some cash reserves for that "once-in-a-lifetime-can't-live-without-it" purchase. The latter only happened twice, after I found out there was a magician tucked away in the last building.

Doc Waddell was a stocky, black-bearded man with black hair veined with silver. He limped when he walked and carried a cane. When he stood behind his counter on a wooden box it gave him larger-than-life appeal to a young wannabe apprentice like me. His 10x15 space was black-lit, giving it a Tyrian hue. Strategically placed cotton cobwebs hung taut in the two corners and deepened his cubed space against the silver tin walls.

His glass display cases were filled with plastic vomit, brass chop cups, and a rainbow of silk scarves. For three weeks, two days a week, I camped at

Doc's magic shop for three to four hours. If he got sick of having me around, he never let me know it. Doc's wife, who ran the register, seemed equally as pleased to see me. I asked Doc to show me some of the more difficult tricks he sold, but I never asked him to show me how the trick worked unless I bought it for myself. I enjoyed watching him work, his fat fingers working intricate routines with coins and beads. Most of the tricks I already knew or owned, yet I watched intently so I could improve my pattern, which is a magician's term for "delivery," or so I could learn new stories to tell during my routine. I enrolled myself into an imaginary mini-magic camp under the tutelage of Doc Waddell.

One of the things Doc had that kept me coming back nearly as much as to watch him work was a dried specimen, a creature for lack of a better term, locked away in a shadowbox with a glass front. This dried "alien" was wired upright but rested on white cotton padding. It had slanted eye sockets, a pointed head, twisted tail, and a skeletal system. But worst of all, it had a mouth that curled into a deviant smile. It was no longer than eighteen inches tall, and in its box it sat resting against a post that held up "Doc's Magic Shop" sign. Everyone asked about this archeological mystery. It stopped entire families dead in their tracks, who awed and gasped at the creature's hideousness. Young girls would bring their unsuspecting friends over and dare them to look closely at the head or tail, but most often the girl and her friends would run away squealing and screaming with their hands covering their mouths.

The story Doc told everyone about its discovery was as believable as watching him pull a red silk scarf out of his bare left hand, only to make it vanish back into the same empty space. He claimed he was hiking up a well-used trail to Clingman's Dome, the Appalachian Trail's highest point, after it had been raining for four days straight. As he neared the peak, he noticed just off trail an odd-colored lump sticking out from under a pile of freshly-fallen red and orange autumn leaves. He stepped lightly towards the strange mass and cleared away the leaves with the toe of his boot. That's when he discovered what was there before our very eyes. Looking around to see if anyone was watching him or playing a practical joke, Doc picked up the leathery, soaked mass and slipped it into his backpack. Instead of hiking on to the top, he turned back and headed to his car. At this point in the story he tells people that the area he was hiking in is part of the Smoky Mountain National Park, and that it is illegal to remove any natural objects from the Park. However, what he found was not natural so he felt it was acceptable for him to remove this artifact, as long as he didn't tell a park ranger.

Doc continues his tale by adding that he took the unknown entity to a friend who worked at the University, and had his friends look at his find. No one at the University knew what to make of the mysterious object, but they all suggested to Doc that if he would let them keep it for a couple more days, they could run some tests and hopefully give him some answers.

"That was a trap if I ever saw one," Doc explained. "They just wanted to keep it for themselves."

Part of the story that I remember Doc telling me in private was his own theory of where the creature came from.

"A long, long time ago the Smoky Mountains were covered with water," he explained, "and over millions of years the mountains rose up to form islands. Clingman's Dome would have been one of the first islands to pop up from the water's surface. I figure that this is some kind of prehistoric thing that lived near water, or hell, it may have even lived in the water, and it eventually crawled out on Clingman's Dome and died. Over time, its remains kept getting washed down the mountain, little by little by the rains, and I just happened upon it at the right time."

This was a reasonable explanation that I told and retold to anyone who listened. What I later realized was that Doc was not only giving me a sound theory for the origins of his miniature "dinosaur." Doc was telling me how the world works.

During the weeks we were looking for a house to live in, Mom took us to the local library. My first trip there, I looked up books on the Smoky Mountain National Park. Mostly I wanted to test Doc's theory, possibly proving him wrong. I read about its history, its laws, its former inhabitants. I learned that what Doc had said about the water, the millions and millions of years, was for the most part true. Also true was that no one was allowed to take any natural

objects from the Park. I was discovering new things about a place into which I was about to settle with my family.

By the end of three weeks, my parents found common ground and we moved into a farmhouse on forty acres in Philadelphia, Tennessee, a small town ten miles east of Sweetwater. The long and narrow single-story home sat at the top of a hill. The driveway was steep and switch-backed twice on itself. Behind the house were three buildings—a new brick double-garage, a wooden barn, and a separate wooden tool shed. Barbed-wire fences outlined two pastures, the closest of which came with the house, and another lower pasture that belonged to our neighbors on the other side of the hill. Between the house and the fence grew a twelve-tree apple orchard, still young and small, hardly producing anything worthy of a pie.

From our yard we could look down on three of our neighbors' houses and an abandoned mobile home. It was as though our home was tucked away, secluded from the rest of the world, and that made it difficult for us to make any effort to meet our neighbors. It would turn out that we did not need to make any effort; our neighbors did the work for us.

A few days after we moved in, a large blue diesel truck climbed our steep driveway and parked next to our cars. First the driver's door opened and a middle-aged woman with short brown hair stepped out from behind the wheel,

and then walked around to the passenger door, opened it, and helped a white-hair lady in her seventies out of the truck and up to our screened porch door.

Mom and I were sitting on a couch we had moved onto the porch and were finishing our cups of morning coffee.

"Hi," the brown-hair woman shouted, "You'ens new to the neighborhood, huh?" It came out as a half-statement, half-question. We opened the door and invited them in.

"Yeah," Mom replied, "Just moved here."

"Well, I'm Betty and this is Sarah," the woman said as she pointed to the little lady who was a full foot shorter than she was. "We're your neighbors on the 'fir' side of the hill."

"We brought you some fresh-baked bread and cookies. Where you'ens from?" Betty asked.

"Why thank you very much. We came from South Carolina, on Lake Murray," Mom answered as politely as she was asked.

"Ooh, never been there. Course, never been anywhere outside this state, and only left this county a fist-full of times," Betty said.

"I've been there a couple times," Sarah piped in, "My first husband was a preacher and we went down there for a revival." Mom and I stood there, not knowing exactly where to take the conversation.

"Don't you know, I've been married three times, and I outlived everyone of my husbands," Sarah continued, "and two of them was named George."

Sarah laughed, leaned forward, and slapped the front of her pink pants.

"Well, I didn't know, but now I do," Mom said, laughing in an awkward way that offered her condolences and yet kept the mood light.

"Come on Sarah," Betty said quickly, "we'll let them get back to unpackin'. If you'ens need anything, just give us a holler." And with that the two women climbed back in the big, blue truck and left.

Mom and I stared at each other, stared at the bread and cookies, and started laughing.

"Did that just happen?" I asked her. "Did they just do that?"

"Well, I reckon they did," she said, "and that was real nice of them."

Neighbors had never come over to introduce themselves to us before, nor had they brought over house-warming gifts. The burden was taken off our shoulders; we did not have to make the ever-awkward introductions to complete strangers, as we had done before many times over.

Later that afternoon, another car pulled up. This time it was a small gray Chevy sedan. At first it looked as if no one was behind the wheel because all we could see was an Australian Shepherd with one blue eye sitting in the passenger seat. After a couple minutes, a stooped old man slowly made his way out of the car. With his left hand pressed against the car's body, he shuffled around the

back end of the vehicle and up to the passenger door. He opened it and the black and white Aussie jumped out and stood by his master's side.

By this time, Mom already had the screened porch door open for the stranger who was taking slow baby steps toward her. A small plastic bag swung in his right hand. When he got within five feet of Mom, he raised his gray golf-style cap and smiled.

"Come in," Mom offered along with her hand to help the old man up the three concrete steps.

"Hello," the man said, "I'm Roy Murr. Betty said she met you earlier."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Murr," Mom said as she helped him into the rocking chair on the porch. Mr. Murr removed his cap and set it on his knee. His bare head showed the details of age. His round face were dotted by dark eyes, square glasses, and white teeth. His dog immediately lay down by his feet.

"I brought these for you. I make them in my shop." Mr. Murr offered the plastic bag to Mom. She reached in and pulled out three small mushrooms crafted of dried persimmon slices and apple wood. The persimmon slices were nailed to the top of a hand carved wooden stem to form the cap of the mushroom. On the bottom of the stem, written in black marker, read "Murr 1991."

"I live at the bottom of the hill with my dog, Jip," Mr. Murr told us. His house was one of the three we could see from our yard.

"You live by yourself?" Mom asked.

"I sure do. I'm ninety years old and I eat bacon and eggs for breakfast every morning. God takes good care of me."

"I guess He does," Mom said with a hint of disbelief.

Mr. Murr visited with us for over an hour, and then left as slowly as he came. We all stood at the door and waived to him as he pulled out of the driveway, mostly to make sure he wouldn't crash into anything on his way home. Every day, Mr. Murr drove his dog up to our house and sat with us, filling us with stories and history lessons—about himself, about the town of Philadelphia, and about our forty-acre piece of countryside. He pointed out a large tree at the edge of a creek below our house where a Confederate Civil War deserter was rumored to have hanged himself.

"You need to be writing this down," Mom suggested to Mr. Murr.

"I have. I typed up everything I could remember a couple years ago. I need someone to make copies, so I can give it to my kids."

"Well, I can do that," Mom told him. "I just want a copy for myself too."

The next day Mr. Murr brought over a large envelope stacked with typewritten sheets.

"It ain't got no title or nuthin'," Mr. Murr said as he handed Mom the envelope. She took the papers to a local copy shop and had them bound. She made a title page and called the collection, "Remembering by Roy Murr." She gave Mr. Murr three copies for his ninety-first birthday and kept one for herself.

I picked up Mom's plastic-bound copy after the birthday gathering we had for Mr. Murr and took it to my room. On the inside cover was a photocopy of a Polaroid picture Mom had snapped of Mr. Murr during one of his visits. The book was seventy pages long, and I read it all in one sitting.

It opened with, "I am now a confused old man. ... I feel like some of the events that came to pass in my life were miracles even tho (sic) it looks like fairy tales."

I poured over the life of the man with whom we just had cake and ice cream. He was twenty years older than my grandparents and here in my hands were his first-hand stories, as they happened, not passed down from one person to another. I read about Mr. Murr's memory of a funeral, meeting his wife, and his devotion to God. He had written down his memories with amazing clarity:

When I was about four years old, one rainy day, we were looking out the window as a funeral procession was going by. Mama said 'it's an awful bad time to have a burying.' A pretty young girl had died from whopping (sic) cough. ... When funerals were held at church, the bell would toll or ring the number of times as the age of the deceased. They had two bell ropes. One made the bell swing and one would pull the clapper against the bell. These rang 3 or 4 seconds apart so the town people could know the age of the deceased and by the slow ring they would know there was a funeral.

It seems that I was a Peter Pan kind of boy. I did not want to grow up. It was lots of fun living just being a boy one time.

I was about 17 years old when I went to Aunt Josie's for a visit. David Duncan, two Bean boys and I went camping and fishing on the Tennessee River down at the mouth of Little River. ... They swam to the shore on the Little River side. It did not look so far to me, so I tried to follow. I was not a very good swimmer. It was

farther than it looked. The current was swifter than I had expected. My arms got tired. My shoulders ached. I was out of breath. ... When I felt that I could not swim any farther my hand struck sand. There was a sand bar about a foot under the water. I sat on it until I got good and rested. ... I feel that the Lord knew before I was born that I was going to need that sand bar.

... I met Alma, June 27, 1925. She looked like she was about 18 years old that night. I asked if I could walk her home. She said O.K. I saw her at church the next day, she looked like she was about 13 years old. I never asked her for another date till she got to looking older, but I kept my eyes on her every chance I had. We dated occasionally for a while and got to dating regular. We decided to get married without causing anybody any trouble. I had a car.

Every story, every encounter, highlighted Mr. Murr's firm belief that life was a gift, and he was thankful to have it. He kept his life simple and his mind sharp. He lived without regret, and I envied him.

Every Sunday, Mr. Murr called his children to let them know he was well. Mr. Murr's oldest son, Wayne, lived an hour away in Knoxville. On a cold Thursday night in March, ninety-three-year-old Murr called his son. This time, however, Mr. Murr wasn't making any sense. He told his son that Alma was calling for him and that he needed to go. Alma had passed away nearly sixteen years before that night.

Wayne called Betty and her husband, Walt, asking them to go check on his father. By the time they drove down the road to Mr. Murr's house, it was too late. Mr. Murr had left in his car and taken Jip with him. Three inches of snow fell that night, and by the next morning the police were called and a search was underway. Our family printed flyers with Mr. Murr's photo on it and posted

them all over the county. We visited the two closest hospital emergency rooms. Nobody had seen him. Search and rescue helicopters were finally called in to help.

Three days passed, and one of Mr. Murr's grandsons, Jeff Murr, decided to take a walk in the pasture behind his grandfather's house.

"I heard the dog barking first," Jeff reported in a local paper. "When I got close, I found the car. I saw he wasn't in the car and then started walking down the hill. I didn't touch anything. I saw him."

Mr. Murr was found dead Sunday morning, on the ground not ten feet from his car. He was a quarter-mile from his home. His dog, Jip, had lain by his side since Thursday night, never leaving his master. Mr. Murr's funeral was the second I had ever attended, and it was no easier to bear than Margie's had been.

Death is a prime symbol of absence. It takes a person out of your life and leaves you to figure out what role he or she played in your life. Death is absolute in the sense that it does not change. The person is gone and will never come back into your life in any tangible way, and in that light it makes it less difficult to begin the grieving process.

What may be more difficult than dealing with death is understanding what role a living person plays in your life—someone who comes and goes, who lies and cheats, and who is someone you are supposed to love and trust.

It took less than a year for Dad to lose his job with Watts Bar. Mounting tension over differing religious views between my parents, and coping with Dad's insatiable spending habits, created an unstable relationship between them. Mom was doing everything she could to fix the problems, and still keep a warm dinner on the table. She was still home-schooling us, taking us to church, and reading every self-help book on co-dependency in print.

Dad was busy trying to provide for his family the best way he knew how, with an income. He took a job with South Texas Nuclear plant near Bay City, Texas. He was gone for three months before he returned for his first visit, the longest stretch of time he had ever been away.

As the oldest man left in the house behind my father, I thought I was responsible for learning life's important lessons from him. I decided to give our relationship one serious shot. If he wasn't going to be around here to teach me, I would have to follow him. I asked if I could move to Texas with him for part of the summer. I was fourteen, and there were things I needed to know about being a man. The morning before we left, we sat together on the porch drinking coffee and talking.

"You want some advice on life, son?" Dad asked, leaning forward in the rocking chair and resting his cup of coffee on his thigh.

"Sure, that would be great," I said.

"Ok. First, sleep with as many women as you can before you get married, because once you say 'I do,' you're trapped for the rest of your life. And second, money may not buy you happiness, but it comes damn close."

"That's it, huh," I said, not knowing if he was serious.

"I mean it, son. You follow those two rules, you won't screw up."

I wish I could say that the time I lived with him in Texas, just the two of us, fixed everything. I wish I could say it made me respect who he was as my father, and as a person. I could not even tell if he wanted me out there. He would always give me cash so I could get out of the apartment and entertain myself, mostly by walking to the movie theatre. We would go out to eat or cook some elaborate seafood dish, but as the summer wore on, I found myself ordering any dish completely unlike what Dad ordered, and I did this on purpose.

We made many trips to the Gulf, fishing or seining on the weekends. Nothing we did together seemed important, to me or to him. I watched him drink every night, without exception, watch television and then go to bed. I do not remember one meaningful conversation we had that summer. After a few weeks, I was more than ready to leave.

Dad's job in Texas lasted until the end of that year. He got another job with Watts Bar and moved back in with us. Four months later, he lost that one. Then he was offered a job in Michigan, working for Palisades nuclear plant; that job lasted almost a year, during which Dad made only a couple visits.

Life at home quickly evolved into a family of four. Derek and I were the men of the house. We finished our schoolwork and spent the rest of the day outside, exploring creek beds, nearby pastures, or squirrel hunting in the woods. Anything we once enjoyed doing with Dad became our own adventure. Those activities belonged to us now — all but one.

Derek and Mom kept four pet rabbits in a hutch behind the barn. We built the hutch by hand from scrap boards left in the barn, dense oak boards. After we put together the frame, we enclosed it with heavy steel gauge wire, the kind of wire that required two hands on the wire snips to cut. We started with one rabbit and one hutch, but within a couple months we had four rabbits and two cages built.

Mom made two or three trips each day to care for the rabbits. She named them all, talked to them, and occasionally took them out of their cages to hold them.

On a cold March morning, Derek and I went to play around on the makeshift climbing wall we nailed to one of the barn walls. Afterwards, we went to feed the rabbits. Immediately we knew something terrible had happened. The bag of food was torn into and the food eaten. Mixed with bits of the brown paper bag were clumps of soft fur — rabbit fur. One of the cages had been ripped into and two of the rabbits were missing. Dog tracks littered the muddy ground around the coops. There was a six-inch hole ripped in the bottom of the cage.

We were stunned by the strength the dog would have needed to use to snip through the steel wire.

Derek and I followed the muddy tracks as they led under the barbed fence and into the nearby pasture. After we climbed the fence, we saw two dogs, a German shepherd and a brown Pit bull, running away from us and toward one of the homes at the bottom of the hill. We knew exactly to whom the dogs belonged. The dogs belonged to neighbors we had never met but had heard a lot about from Betty and Sarah. They owned a horse ranch and most of the valley bottom. They were rich and wanted everyone to know it, and they kept their two dogs unleashed and unwatched.

We had no direct evidence that those were the two dogs that destroyed our rabbits, so we could not call Animal Control. We also did not want to start a feud between our neighbors and us; that family was rumored to have been obsessively vindictive, and we had our own dog and cats to worry about.

Mom convinced me that we would have to take care of the problem ourselves. She asked me to sit in the barn in the evenings and mornings with my shotgun and wait for the dogs to return for the other two rabbits. I did exactly as she had asked.

The first evening was quiet. I woke up early the next morning, before everyone else, and walked back to the barn. Before I climbed to the top where my lookout was constructed, I walked to the hutch to check on the rabbits. The

German shepherd jumped from behind the cages and ran off. I was too late. The other two rabbits were dead and half-eaten, lying on the ground in front of me.

I ran home crying. I was embarrassed by the fact that I was too late. I had failed the one thing I was asked to do. I sat in the living room, crying and waiting for the others to wake up.

"What's wrong?" Mom asked in her sleepy voice.

"I didn't shoot. I didn't know. I was too late," I sobbed. "The rabbits are gone."

I took Mom and Misty out to the shed to show them what had happened. Mom was furious.

"Let's go see if those dogs still have fur on their mouths," Mom said.

I left my shotgun resting against the fence gate with Misty while Mom and I walked through the pasture toward the neighbor's house. Before we made it to the edge of our property line, both dogs ran straight at us. The Pit bull was charging in front, growling madly at our intrusion. The dogs crossed the road and ran under the fence. Mom and I stopped in our tracks.

"Run!" Mom yelled. I grabbed her arm.

"Don't! They'll chase us," I said. "Just turn around and walk back up slowly."

The Pitt bull was on our heels, growling, barking and nipping the backs of our legs. Mom couldn't stop cursing under her breath, but she tried to remain calm as to not provoke the dogs anymore. The neighbors had left for the

morning, and no one came out to help us. Misty was crying and screaming from the fence.

"Get the gun for Ryan!" Mom snapped.

Misty picked up the shotgun and carried it to me. The dogs had stopped nipping and were now standing behind us about fifteen yards downhill. When I turned and aimed, the German shepherd ran off, but the Pit bull stood its ground, barking and moaning maniacally.

"Shoot it!" Mom yelled.

I froze. I had the dog in my sights, but I couldn't pull the trigger. Even though it had attacked us, destroyed our pets, and was a clear and present threat, I could not move myself to shoot.

"Kill it!" Mom and Misty shouted in unison.

I closed my eyes and the gun went off. I hardly heard it, or felt it. When I opened my eyes, I watched the sturdy brown, four-legged body relax and fall to the ground. Flashes of the dog were mingled in my head with the image of a red-tail hawk, the one with the broken wing.

It wasn't supposed to be me, I thought. This was not my job. This was a responsibility Dad should have been here to fulfill. With the pull of a trigger, I was given the full weight of being my family's protector, and I did not want it.

Dragging the dog took nearly an hour, so for that long I was thinking about what I had just done. And since that hour I have been unable to forget the particulars of that encounter, the feel of a wet nose and sharp teeth on the back of

my legs, the gurgle emanating from the dog between barks, the ringing shotgun, the taste of gunpowder, and the silence that followed. We left the limp mass inside the edge of the woods, covering it with leaves and sticks.

I was sickened by the whole experience. When we got home, I put my gun back in the gun case and never picked it up again. I was angry at everyone – at Mom for asking me to shoot, at Misty for bringing me the gun, at the dog for what it had done, and at Dad because he was not there for any of it. I decided my punishment for them would be that I would never shoot a gun again. It was my penance for taking a life, and I knew it would disappoint Dad, which is what I was counting on the most.

Dad's affair was discovered on Father's Day in 1994. Mom had begun suspecting infidelity several months before then. She started turning up mysterious receipts for flowers and slips of paper with phone numbers written on them but no names. Dad promised he would come down from Michigan and visit for Father's Day weekend. Through one of the phone numbers, Mom found a name and address of a woman who lived fifteen miles away and who was a member of the same gym Dad went to when he was living with us. On a hunch, she drove by the woman's house early in the morning on the day Dad said he would be arriving, and his car was parked in her driveway.

The divorce was finalized the following February. Custody was not an issue. Dad never even suggested that anyone live with him, although for one

odd day I had considered it. What made the divorce difficult for him was the fight to keep his material stuff—tools, cars, a boat, and of course, his guns. Mom gave him most of what he asked for, except two things. She was awarded both of Dad's custom rifles, the ones he had dropped out of college to make. That was her fitting revenge, to take Dad's most precious possessions.

Toasted Mice

The end of all exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
— T.S. Eliot

Dad would get his revenge as well. He kept what was almost as dear to him as his guns — his money. He withheld from paying alimony and child support after the divorce. Although Tennessee strictly enforced the law against “dead-beat Dads,” the State’s hands were proverbially “tied” when it came to tracking people down in other states. Since Dad lived in Michigan, the State of Tennessee could not force him to pay us what we had been awarded.

“Your Mom doesn’t deserve any of my hard-earned money,” Dad told Misty when she spoke to him on the phone. “She can get her own damn job.”

If Misty pleaded with him long enough, we would get an occasional check in the mail marked, “for the kids.” However, it was never enough. Our first introduction into poverty came in a small yellow envelope from the State Assistance program. Mom signed us up for food stamps. She was too embarrassed to use them at any of the nearby grocery stores, so she drove a half-hour away every week to shop at a Bi-Lo in Madisonville.

The second step into poverty came more quickly. Our house on the hill had been sold by the realty company from whom we had been renting, and we were given two weeks to move out. We were desperate to find any place we could afford. Two miles down the road sat an abandoned white house with

peeling paint and a cracking foundation. It was one broken window away from being condemned. The house was owned by a preacher who lived an hour away. He rented it to us at a reasonable price if we promised we would fix it up. Despite knowing we could not afford to do so, Mom agreed so we would have a cheap place to live.

The house had no air conditioning or source of heat. In the summer we used window fans and in the winter we plugged in portable heaters. We sealed as many cracks with tape and plastic as we could find. There was a hole in our bathroom floor large enough to drop a softball through it. We had two cats, but even they could not control the limitless mice that infested the walls, cupboards and ceiling. At night we could hear them scrambling over our heads or up the walls, and each of us had a half-dozen nights of being woken by a mouse running across our arm or face. The smell in the house could not be covered, no matter how many candles were lit or bottles of air freshener sprayed. We never invited anyone inside, and did our best to keep even our closest friends away.

Mom sent pictures to Dad of where we were living, in what conditions his children were sleeping, but it changed nothing. Mom took a job as a home-care aid that required her to leave us alone three days a week. Misty started taking cosmetology classes, and I worked at a nearby summer camp and pizza parlor. We did our best to share the one car we were left in the divorce, a 1982 two-door Yugo.

To say, "times were tough," would not describe the odor given off by a dead mouse burning in a pop-up toaster, charred under the slices of bread you had just eaten for breakfast. These hard times, however, forged the four of us into responsible adults. We lived a lean life. We had few things one could call "extra." I saved a summer's worth of wages to buy a six hundred dollar Ford Escort station wagon, which I dubbed the "Batmobile" because of its glossy black paint job and the fact that it created a thick cloud of exhaust that looked like a smokescreen used for quick getaways.

The reason we worked so hard to survive was not so people would stop feeling sorry for us, or to get even with Dad and show him how much better we were without his help; we worked hard so we could prove to ourselves that we deserved a better life, that anything can be overcome with perseverance and hard work. We stopped blaming other people for our problems and started fixing the ones we could.

One of the most notable side effects that came from our struggle to make ends meet was our abandonment of the church. As if a light bulb had suddenly been turned on, we all stopped looking for answers from above. Instead we started questioning our own sources of energy – we had a nuclear chain reaction, sparked by our separation from Dad. Each of us had to seek a source of replenishment. I turned to the outdoors.

Our dilapidated house had two things going for it: it was surrounded by woods, and we had no close neighbors. Derek and I spent every spare moment

we could afford outside, cutting trails through the woods, exploring new roads on our bikes. There was nothing worth keeping us inside that dirty house, no television or video games. The only times we did go in were to eat or sleep.

We spent two years living in that dump, saving every spare cent so we could first buy a bigger, dependable car and more importantly, so that we could afford to move somewhere better. Misty graduated from cosmetology school and began working at a salon. Mom was certified in the state of Tennessee as a hair stylist, and she, too, went to work in a salon. I finished high school through a home-school course based in Chicago and took the GED so that I could apply to college.

I was admitted to a small liberal arts college in Maryville, an hour southeast of Philadelphia. For the first time, we moved into a new house because we chose to move, not because anyone told us we had to. For the first time, we had a future ahead of us.