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Southern Reader

AN ONLINE QUARTERLY MAGAZINE ABOUT LIFE IN THE SOUTH



Big Chicken

*A short story about
one tough bird*

Camp Meetings

*Mixing good food
with religion*

On Biscuits

Get 'em while they're hot

David Hinman

If not *Divine*, at least it's a *Southern* dream

Okay, this is how it all came about. I had this dream, and in it I was involved with this wildly successful e-magazine called *The Divine Reader*. I mean, world leaders were reading it, it was getting reviews from newspapers and magazines ranging from the *New York Times* to *Rolling Stone*, and most important, David Letterman was making fun of it.

When I woke up the next morning I thought it was a fairly interesting dream, but I was mystified as to the meaning of *Divine Reader*. I immediately went to the internet to see if there was anything remotely close to a *Divine Reader*, but I was unable to find anything of that description. But after all, I thought as I began to wake up, the term didn't even make sense. *SouthernReader*, however, did. I've always been fascinated by all things Southern, and as for *Reader*, I still have fond memories of my *Little Red Reader*, not to mention my *Weekly Reader*. So maybe *that's* where my dream was directing me.

Now, understand, I'm not one that believes that our waking life is directed by dreams, or for that matter, visions from the netherworld, but I have had a few dreams in which I was undertaking some task only to awaken and continue (or restart) the task and take it to completion. (I *also* went through a phase of flying in my dreams when I wanted to escape enemy soldiers or see exactly what was on the roof of my elementary school, but that's quite another issue for another issue.)

When I was a senior in college, I was trying desperately to complete the required number of illustrations for a

mixed-media course I was taking, and I was quickly running out of time and inspiration, so one night I decided that I would not go to bed until I came up with something worth working on. At some point I drifted off to sleep and began to dream that I was a senior in college, and I was trying desperately to complete the required number of illustrations for a mixed-media course I was taking, and I was quickly running out of time and inspiration. I thought and sketched for awhile, then all of a sudden, a brilliant idea began to manifest itself. It took me all night to complete it, but when it was finished, it was the most incredible piece of art I had ever created. Not only that, world leaders were wanting to buy it, it got reviews from newspapers and magazines ranging from the *New York Times* to *Rolling Stone*, and most important, Johnny Carson was making fun of it.

Then, I woke up.

My deadline was still there, but unfortunately, my stunning piece of art wasn't. But, I did remember the concept, so I started the long task of re-creating the piece of art. It took a couple of days, and once it was finished, no world leaders or art critics beat a path to my door. What's

more, it wasn't even the best piece of art I had ever done. It was, however, one of the oddest.

It was a black-and-white, pen-and-ink drawing of a gunslinger framed by a shiny circle, as if you were looking at him from inside a silver gun barrel. The gunslinger had his gun in his hand, but the barrel of his gun had yet to clear the housing of its holster. The look on his face was the mixture of fear and surprise that can only be possessed by someone who only has a split second to live. On the ground in front of him was the elongated shadow of the opposing gunslinger. The vantage point was that of the bullet which had already begun its trip which would take it through the barrel of the victor's gun and, momentarily, into the slower gunslinger's heart. To this day, I don't understand what it all meant, but it did earn me an A, if not for *execution*, at least for *abnormality*.

And so, here we go again all these years later with the culmination of yet another dream. I hope that you'll enjoy this one with me, and if you do, you'll pass the link on to a friend. It has certainly taken quite a bit longer to complete than the "*You Are The Bullet*" piece of art, and hopefully, it's a bit less abnormal. But aside from all the fun of putting this premiere issue together, I suppose the main reason I plowed ahead with it was I simply couldn't think of any reason not to. Welcome to the dream.

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SouthernReader

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Big Chicken

A Short Story by David Ray Skinner

I've been blinded three times in my life," he said to me totally unprovoked and for no apparent reason. Actually, at that juncture in my life—it was the first summer of my thirties—I had gotten to the point where nothing surprised me anymore. So it seemed only natural that this guy began to confide in me as if I were some kind of benevolent narrator-priest.

As he started talking, I began amusing myself by imagining that we were two unknown actors in a low-budget movie that no one would ever see, and this guy had just delivered his first line.

"Tell me about the first time," I said, coolly and right on cue. We were sitting in rusty-red folding chairs by a Taste-Snak machine inside an East Tennessee Texaco station. My father was sticking his head under the hood of my wounded 22-year-old Buick and gesturing and talking in that foreign language of machines to the Texaco mechanic, so I had, as they say, time to kill, or at least to amuse myself.

"It was 1947, right after the war," he said, closing his eyes to concentrate. He was an older man, maybe in his late-sixties, and he was wearing a one-piece, pea-green polyester jumpsuit with a little gold anchor on the pocket. "I was just out of the army, and had got me a job at the Maryville movie theater running the projector. I was running a Saturday night western and was standing flat dab flush with the dang projector when the dad-blamed light bulb blew. They took me out on a stretcher, and I was blind for three days."

"Was there a lot of glass in your eye?" I asked, at this point, genuinely interested.

"No glass," he said, shaking his head, "It was big shards of raw projector light that done it. They put me on that stretcher and took me home to Mama, and she made up some patches for my eyes and put me in the

guest room. That room was always dark, you know. I never went back to that movie theater. It gave me the creeps just to drive by it. They finally shut it down, you know. Now, it's a furniture store, and it don't

"Oh, yeah. The second time I got blind was in 1966. They had just finished that piece of the interstate up there, and I was just driving down the road, havin' a good time. But like some dad-blamed fool, I had my window down with my arm out...this one, with the Hawaii tattoo." He held up a forearm branded with a sad and wrinkled hula girl in a hairy grass skirt.

"It came in the window—*pachang!*—and went here and across here." He drew a line with his finger just under his eyebrows from his left eye over to his right eye. "And it all went black. Toeta-lee blind. To this day I don't know how I got my car stopped. And it was a big car, too. Big ol' blue Pontiac. They found me at the side of the road, crying like a little ol' baby."

"Good grief," I said, "Somebody shot you? The bullet grazed *both* your eyes?"

"Weren't no bullet," he said slowly and solemnly.

"Then, what—?"

"They say it was some kind of bug."

"Some kind of bug?"

He nodded his shiny grey head slowly. "The doctors told me. They say they found insect feet all over the side of my face."

The door of the Texaco flew open with my father at the knob. "We're done. Let's git," he said. "If you want, we could even swing by the farm and see Hawkins. Maybe even pet the big chicken, if it's still around."

Actually, even in the event that Hawkins was still at the farm, the big chicken was definitely not there. The big chicken had not been around for a long time. But I had been in New York for seven years or so, and my father had not been up to the farm in at least a dozen

years. And for that matter, I don't think he had ever seen the chicken in question, much less petted him, if that had even been possible. But as strange as it may



"Hey," he exclaimed, "There's something big going down in your chickenyard."

bother me none. The spell was broken by easy chairs!"

"And you were blinded two other times?" I asked, again on cue.

seem, the big chicken had figured into my stay in New York which had figured into my escape from the place, which had led us straight into the waiting room of this very East Tennessee Texaco, which was now occupied by my father, myself, the mechanic who was adding up the charges to restore the great Buick to its proper place on Interstate 40, and of course, the thrice-blinded local sage.

I hadn't always been the broken-auto'd, desperate refugee from the big city that I was portraying that hot afternoon. Less than a decade before, and just a few miles away, I had been a carefree, Baptist college fine arts graduate turned long-haired pseudo hippie. I had met Hawkins in the early '70s at a popular theme park in Nashville where we drew what they called caricatures, but what we called whacked-out cartoon depictions of the inner souls of tourists. That had been between my junior and senior years in college, and up until then, I had never met anyone quite like the Hawk. He was the original cosmic zen hillbilly with a little

bit of con man thrown in for good measure. He wore his long black hair in Indian braids and often passed himself off as full-blooded Cherokee. What's more, he could speak in broken English and fix you with an icy glare to hammer home the point. In actuality, he was descended from at least ten generations of competent middle-class bookkeepers, which, much to the chagrin of his poor father and grandfather, came to a clamoring halt with the Hawk. But, this was not to say that he wasn't enterprising. He had successfully eluded the theme park's hair code by cleverly concealing his braids underneath a smart, blonde, flat-top wig. Only the most astute of his subjects were able to spot the tell-tale sprigs of black hair beneath the wig, to which he explained that he had a terminal head-and-hair disease.

When my graduation rolled around the following spring, the Hawk showed up in full costume at my off-campus flophouse and convinced me that we should take our show on the road. The logical choice, he said, was Gatlinburg, a small resort town/tourist trap at the edge of The Great Smoky Mountains National Park where we could further expand our various talents of exploiting out-of-towners. The

exploitation, Hawkins explained, could come in the form of the afore-mentioned cartoon portraits, along with a yet-to-be-named bluegrass band which he and I would eventually form and front.

By June of that year, this ambitious, if bizarre, plan began to take shape. We loaded up my four-door black Falcon (which we called *The Black Falcon*) with guitars, clothes, and art tables and supplies and headed for the mountains. Upon our arrival, we proceeded to comb the nooks and valleys looking for an inexpensive house (read: "shack") to rent, which is how we became acquainted with Ol' Bud and his 40-acre farm.

When we drove up into the yard, Bud was standing by the pump, which was halfway between the empty farmhouse and the abandoned chickenyard. He was

...we drew what they called caricatures, but what we called whacked-out cartoon depictions of the inner souls of tourists.

clearly an old-time farmer, tall and seasoned by the wind and sun. He was wearing a checkered long-sleeve shirt, patented faded overalls and an old straw hat from which errant tufts of white hair nonchalantly poked. He was also in the process of yelling incoherent commands at his big dumb cows as they marched single file through the tall grass. "Ho! Ha! Baroovus!" he yelled, totally ignoring the strange young men emerging from *The Black Falcon*. Hawkins walked right up to him. "Heard you had a house to rent."

Ol' Bud put down his bucket and stared at something over our heads. "Fifteen dollar a month, and stay away from my cows."

"We'll pay you twenty-five a month," said the Hawk, his Indian braids shining in the late morning sun.

"Fifteen dollar a month, and stay away from my cows." Bud shot a glance toward the pasture. "Ho! Ha! Baroovus!"

"It's refreshing to see a man that really loves his cows," Hawkins offered.

"Yeah, I love 'em alright...I love 'em all the way to the bank. They're fat ol' greenbacks with horns. Ever time I butcher one, I go home to the wife with a smile on my face and a wad of bills in my pock-

et. That's exactly why I'm telling you to stay clear of 'em. I'll rent you the house alrighty, but if you go messin' with my greenbacks, you boys'll be gone before you can say 'jackrabbit.' Is that clear enough for you?"

We accepted the terms of the lease and moved into the farmhouse that following weekend. What's more, we even found some token dogs, Freud and Hosepipe, to lay under the porch and bark at anyone who drove up the high-weed, quarter-of-a-mile dirt driveway. The dogs were originally named Blackie and Brownie when we first acquired them, but they underwent a formal name-change within a few weeks. Blackie became Freud because of his preoccupation with the ink blots on our abandoned artboards on the back porch. Brownie became Hosepipe one night after a gaggle of drunks at a stagefront table demanded that our makeshift band have a name, and upon our refusal to respond, they began loudly referring to us as "Plato's Hosepipe." The band and the dog were

named in one fell swoop. In fact, the dog was also called *Plato* by the Hawk when he was too drunk or otherwise disoriented to remember the exact excerpt of the name. The valley vet who took care of the dogs' shots always referred to Hosepipe as *Pluto*, not only because she was a huge Disney cartoon fanatic, but mainly because Hawkins had an annoying tendency to neglect to close the uppermost loop on his A's when writing in a hurry, and he was usually in some sort of a hurry whenever he dropped off the dogs. Looking back, I've often realized that it's no wonder that poor Hosepipe harbored a perpetual identity crisis through most of his brief and luckless life.

In addition to our nightly spot on the stage of a Gatlinburg bar where we perfected our bluegrass ploy, we also found a home on the sidewalk in front of the Mountain Wax Figures Museum during daylight hours to launch our caricature business. Message T-shirts were very big that summer. Every other caricature we drew featured the client/subject/victim wearing a recently-purchased T-shirt from the wax museum or from one of the other adjoining shops. The most popular shirt from the wax museum had a picture of the

Pope shaking hands with a circa-1957 Elvis with the inscription: “*My Parents Went to the Mountain Wax Figures Museum and All I Got Was This Stupid T-Shirt.*” Next door was the “Great Big Clouds of Joy” Christian bookstore, and they also featured T-shirts that summer, most notably one that loudly announced:

“*My Grandparents Went to Heaven and All I Got Was This Stupid T-Shirt.*”

But our T-shirt caricatures were of little help to our struggling venture. Some people even complained that they were too surreal (we often referred to our work as Salvador Dali Parton-esque). And as for our music, it was a little too Jimi Hendrix-meets-Bill Monroe, so we started having trouble raising the rent (Ol’ Bud raised it to \$25 after the first month). That’s why when the September rent was due, we started doing destruction work for Sgt. Francis, an eccentric ex-Marine turned militant vegetarian.

“Mucus!” he said, “Mucus is what does your body in. Mucus will bring our government to its knees one of these days. That is, if it doesn’t first topple our very civilization as we know it.” We were returning from a hard day of tearing down old houses to make way for a scenic highway through the valley that we would come to hope would never be built.

“What kind of truck is this, Sgt. Francis?” asked the Hawk, testing his gift for distraction. We were all three crammed into the front seat. Sgt. Francis was wearing a one-piece pea-green worksuit with a little gold anchor on the pocket, and he was sweating like a man about to die.

“Boys,” he said, ignoring the question, “look at crime. Look at black industrial smoke and dead fish pollution. Look at how a man mistreats his brother, and what do you see?”

“Stinky people?” said the Hawk.

“Mucus, boys, mucus.” By this time, he had turned his pickup into the dusty tracks

of our driveway. “Hey!” he exclaimed, his pointing finger punching the windshield, “There’s something big goin’ down in your chickenyard!”

Sure enough, as the pickup threaded through the weeds at the top of the driveway, the dogs were barking like crazy, and there was a posse of farmers and some

The area below the hanging cow tree was framed on two sides by the pastures where Ol’ Bud kept the rest of his 40-odd cows. And odd they were. They lined the fence row four and five deep on both sides. They all stood stoically watching the farmers in silence except for the lone bull who was bellowing his disapproval.

“Uh-oh,” said the Hawk, “Looks like somebody’s best girlfriend won a trip to McDonald’s.”

Bud stuck his head through the driver’s window on the pickup, just beyond the blanching Sgt. Francis, his jaw moving a full two seconds before the words appeared. “Whut’s that spotted dog’s name?” he asked.

“Freud,” I said.

Bud whirled around pitching some unrecognizable cow’s organ to the dog. “Here, Floyd,” he said.

“Ol’ Bud studied English in Tokyo,” Hawkins said to no one in particular as we scrambled out the door. We turned to thank Sgt. Francis for the work and for helping us earn enough to pay that month’s rent,

but all we saw were his taillights filtering through the dust down the driveway.

After we gave Bud the twenty-five dollars, Hawkins figured we had just enough money left to do a session at a friend’s Nashville studio. “It’s time we got serious about *Plato’s Hosepipe*,” he said.

We loaded up *The Black Falcon* and headed over to Nashville, but when we arrived, his friend was nowhere to be found, and the studio was boarded up and wrapped with bright yellow “Crime Scene” tape. We took the rest of the day off and stopped in at the Hawk’s parents’ house, where we took advantage of a hot, home-cooked meal, the first we’d had in a while. We left their house around midnight and hit I-40, settling in for the long drive home.

Sometime around two or three in the



“My Grandparents went to Heaven and all I got was this stupid T-shirt.”

other friends of Bud’s in the yard between the house and the chickenyard. They wore the excited expressions of a lynch mob as they stood in a circle beneath a headless cow hanging upside down from the top branch of the oak. The big limb creaked as what was left of the big cow’s black and white body twisted in the wind. Although I didn’t want to come right out and admit it, especially in front of Sgt. Francis, who was already on the edge, and Hawkins, who would think it was hysterical, I thought I recognized the cow, even without her face. She was the one with the markings that resembled Europe and Asia etched out in black against a white cowhide ocean. Even turned sideways and upside down, I could still make out the Italian boot toe almost kicking the Sicilian football.

morning, in the middle of nowhere and under an eerie, yellow full moon, Hawkins broke the silence inside *The Black Falcon*. "I just had a weird thought," he said seriously, "What if all of a sudden, Ol' Bud appeared right here on the front seat between us and said, 'I bet you boys didn't know I died while you wuz gone!'" I pushed a little harder on the accelerator.

We got back to the farm at dawn, and when we drove up the driveway, we saw Sgt. Francis sitting on our front porch. The sun was just coming over the mountain to the east, and its golden rays painted the side of his face with broad, yellow stripes. We could tell that he'd been sitting there for quite a while. In his lap, he held a drawstring bag which contained a young white rooster, which we promptly ushered to the viny confines of the empty chicken-house. "You boys ought to think deeply about getting your lives together," he said. Then he turned his attention to Hawkins. "I know your people lived and thrived on buffalo and deer, but I gotta tell ya...it's gonna take some doin' to get over seeing what your farmer friends did to that innocent creature."

"Mucus," said the Hawk. Sgt. Francis nodded knowingly.

A few days later, the chicken Sgt. Francis had given us was walking the grounds around the farmyard surveying his new domain. Ever the watchful canine sentries, Freud and Hosepipe sprang into immediate action at the first sighting of the feathered stranger. For the next few days, it was an oft-repeated scene out of a Looney Tunes cartoon with the chicken beating a hasty retreat, the dogs in hot pursuit. In fact, by the end of the first week of the chicken's stay at the farm, he was beginning to actually resemble a cartoon rooster who had just sat on a bomb, because although he had managed to stay one step ahead of the two dogs, they sometimes got close enough to grab a mouthful of tailfeathers. The resulting effect was one of a spunky young rooster with a bald spot around his butt. His bright white feathers ended at what would have been a beltline if a chicken had a waist; his hindquarters looked like three days worth of bad beard stubble with a button of a stubby tail stuck in the middle.

The chicken also had a wild-eyed, open-mouthed, desperate air of panic about him. But of course, that was my own interpretation. Years later, over several rounds of beer in a Gatlinburg bar, Hawkins casually remarked, for a totally unrelated reason, that "you can see the devil when you look into the eyes of a chicken," so it's entirely possible that I was misinterpreting the chicken's mood at that particular stage of his life. At any rate, the next thing we knew, he was gone. Flown the coop, as it were. What's worse, Freud and Hosepipe had gotten a taste of chicken, or at least of chicken tailfeathers. Actually, I don't think it was so much the taste of blood or feathers as much as it was the pure canine sport of it all. There wasn't a large number of buses or mailmen or even cars to chase out there in the valley

"Once they taste the blood of a chicken, they have to have it. They're like a couple a dope fiends."

where we were living, so I suppose if you were a valley dog, you had to grab all the gusto you could find where and if you could find it.

This laissez faire attitude, however, was not shared by Ol' Bud and his circle of farmer friends, most of whom owned chickens, or should I say *had* chickens; does anyone ever really *own* a chicken? A few days after our particular de-tailed chicken disappeared, dead chickens of various sizes and colors began to fill up the yard in front of the house.

"Holy chickens!" said Hawkins when we first walked out onto the porch that morning. He'd already put the old percolator on the woodstove, and we were gearing up for the dusty, ceremonial morning hike to the distant rusted mailbox. The chickens weren't even eaten. They had no body parts missing. They just lay in the mountain morning sunshine all moist and shiny from fresh dog spit.

Ol' Bud showed up almost immediately. He slammed the door on his tuna-colored '55 pickup, and we could see he was fit to be tied. "I knew as soon as I laid eyes on those damn fool dogs that they were chicken killers," he said. "Once they taste the blood of a chicken, they have to have

it. They're like a couple a dope fiends."

"Gazooks, they're chicken fiends," said the Hawk.

"This ain't one of your cityboy jokes!" said Bud. "Let me put it like this: You boys got a problem. And 'cause I was fool enough to rent you this place, that makes it my problem, too. You boys better fix it, or I will. Why in the world do you have those damn fool dogs around here, anyway? One dog will be fine. But two, especially of that breed, whatever it is, well, it's a big problem. They get bored, and they get into trouble."

He climbed back into his truck. "We're all gonna remember this little talk, okay?"

That afternoon we walked over to the next farm to talk to Darryl and to ask his advice. Since Darryl was our age and had lived in the valley all his life, he had become our liaison with the local community. He was also a musician and would occasionally drive over and bring his guitar along with several of the valley boys. Darryl was familiar with the

problem.

"The best thing to do," he said deliberately, "is to go right back up to your yard and get the very worst, stinking chicken bodies and tie 'em around the dogs' necks. They, law! They hate that."

We loped on back, found some rope and caught the dogs. Then we carefully selected and strung the designated chicken bodies around their necks. Sure enough, they hated it, but after a few days, Freud and Hosepipe began snapping at one another's chicken body. The smell and the flies and the feathers were disgusting, so after two or three days of this ridiculous exercise, we liberated the chicken bodies and gave them a decent burial. A few days later, however, more dead chickens ended up on our front porch, and we knew we had to act fast. We threw Freud into the front seat of *The Black Falcon* and carted him off to a friend's house in Gatlinburg, hoping to retrieve him when the heat died down. Ol' Bud passed us on the narrow Valley Road as we headed out. He was driving like a mad man toward our farmhouse, and his shotgun was in the rack behind his head. Freud still had feathers around his ears and throat. Hawkins shoved the confused dog's head down and

we waved like a couple of drunk tourists. As far as I know, that saved Freud's life, and the last I heard, he was still roaming the back alleys of the pizzarias and fast foods restaurants of Gatlinburg.

Hosepipe wasn't as lucky. For a week or two after the chicken-on-a-rope episode, things sort of returned to normal. No more dead chickens showed up in and around the house. Then one morning, I put Hosepipe's dry dogfood in his dish on the

back porch. Although the view from the rear of the house was stunning—the yard behind it sloped down steeply to the creek revealing a picture postcard view of the mountain—we mostly utilized the back porch to store our art supplies, the galvanized tub we used for our Saturday baths, and the dishes and leashes for the dogs. The back door led from the porch right into the small farmhouse kitchen, but there were no windows on the backside of the house; the kitchen only had windows on the sides. On the west side, the kitchen window looked out into the yard where the old pump stood guarding the abandoned chickenhouse, and out the kitchen's east window you could scan the side porch and the shaded yard that gently sloped down to

the creek beyond an old oak tree which had stood proudly over the house since it was built. And so it was that we only *heard* the fracas occurring on the back porch that fateful morning. It sounded like a fight scene with toenails scratching the boards of the porch and a sharp *ka-ping!* echoing loudly from the metal dog dish. I immediately looked out the kitchen window to the west and saw Hosepipe backed up against the concrete pump housing and staring intently and resentfully at something on the back porch.

As soon as I threw open the back door, I discovered that the *something* was the chicken that had been so miserably tormented by the dogs. His tailfeathers, for the most part, had grown back, and he had gotten considerably larger. What's more, he was back with a bad attitude and a hankering for dry dogfood. But he was as sur-

prised to see me kicking open the door as I was at seeing him terrorize the dog. His head pivoted back and forth briefly, and he flapped off the back porch and ran down toward the creek. "That's the way to do it," I told the still cowering Hosepipe, "Now go get that chicken!" But the perplexed dog had finally learned his lesson and would have no part of it. And the big chicken knew it.

From that point on, he turned the tables

sound and look around nervously. Meanwhile, the chicken would pick up speed and advance toward the dog, walking sideways while flapping his opposite wing. At first, the dog called his bluff, but then it became painfully apparent that the bird was spoiling for a fight. After a few halfhearted attempts to tough it out, the dog finally yielded and would ultimately find another spot to light on the opposite side of the farmyard. The rooster would eventually find him and the whole scene would be repeated again.

As the days passed, the chicken began chasing the dog around the chickenyard in a twisted parody of what the two dogs had put him through (Where was Freud when you *really* needed him?). At this stage of the game, however, the rooster was still afraid of humans, and we could still protect the dog when things got out of hand, as it occasionally did.

One morning we heard the *brockbrockbrock* of a frightened chicken and ran to the window to see what was going on. Just beyond the chickenyard in the upper pasture we saw the fleeting image of the big chicken bobbing and weaving like a drug-crazed quarterback running for his life. "Guess

ol' Hosepipe got tired of being pushed around and finally got the nerve up to show that chicken who's boss," Hawkins casually observed.

But then in unison, we glanced out the front door because the half-asleep dog was thumping his tail in response to his name. We then turned, once again in unison, to the upper pasture just in time to see a healthy remnant of Ol' Bud's herd charging—heads down—after the hapless bird.

"The chicken's done gone and ticked off the cows," I said, "I guess that chicken macho act doesn't carry as much weight in bovine circles."

Hawkins smiled a dreamy grin. "It's always so wonderfully mystical when true farm animals interact."

We figured it was only a matter of time before the chicken would graduate to human targets. A few weekends later this



"You can see the devil when you look into the eyes of a chicken."

on the solitary dog. We finally had to switch Hosepipe's mealtime to after dark—when we knew the chicken would have already retired to the abandoned chickenhouse. Unfortunately, it took us nearly a week to figure that out, and the poor dog was nearly skin and bones when we finally arrived at a satisfactory solution.

But the chicken in exacting his revenge on Hosepipe refused to settle for merely stealing his food and altering his mealtime. No matter where the dog laid down, or what time of day, the chicken sought him out. In a scene repeated dozens of times throughout the day, the chicken would spot the dog lying under a tree or on the porch, and would slowly make his approach while uttering a low crooning noise. Hosepipe would immediately wake up and find the inevitable source of the

theory was tested when Lloyd, the Hawk's artist friend from Nashville, showed up at the farm.

I had actually known Lloyd as long as Hawkins had—we had all met at the same theme park where we drew caricatures—but Lloyd and Hawkins had always hit it off. Lloyd had striking, Marlboro-man, rugged good looks, and he drove a Harley to boot, but I had never forgotten an episode at an after-hours Nashville party late one summer night. It was a wild party at a house on the lake, and the place was lit up by wild emotions and Japanese lanterns bobbing over the shining water. The other caricature and portrait artists from the theme park were there and had already gone in. I was standing at the entrance on the dock with Lloyd taking in the whole scene. "I'm going home," he said suddenly.

"We just got here."

"I don't care. I'm freaking."

"What do you mean," I asked, "We haven't even gotten into the place!"

"You see all these people?" he said, twisting his rugged face. "They could all kick my butt."

"Okay, but why would they?"

"All of them," he said, "Even the girls."

So it wasn't a real surprise when Lloyd was the one the chicken picked as his first human target. We were having breakfast coffee on the front porch when we first heard the screams down the dusty driveway. Hawkins and I chased off the chicken and caught up with Lloyd at Valley Road. "That chicken wants to kick my butt," he said. After that morning, Ol' Bud, Hawkins and I were the only people the rooster wouldn't chase. In fact,

he became the watchdog that Hosepipe and Freud had failed to be. No nonresident of the farm escaped his evil eye and side-step aggression.

Even Darryl from down the road wasn't immune. And he had grown up around chickens, so he knew their destructive nature. He had first visited our place within a month or so of our moving in, and immediately discovered the Hawk's most recent issue of *Oui* which was lying on the

cargo trunk-turned-coffee table. Hawkins had taken great pains to have his subscription of the magazine sent to the farm, and the mailman had driven all the way up to the house to deliver the first issue that arrived. When Darryl discovered the magazine, he squealed with delight, "Oh you eye! Oh you eye!" Soon after that, he began showing up with various local boys along with their instruments.

The chicken, however, had an intense

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"Good grief, Zanzo, you should never mess with an angry chicken."

hatred for Darryl. No one ever knew why. Maybe it was because of Darryl's sports-coat and bow tie that he always wore when he came over. Or maybe it was because the big chicken knew that Darryl knew him for what he was: an everyday barnyard rooster. Nothing more; nothing less. For whatever reason, when Darryl would drive up into the yard, the bird would appear out of nowhere and would bear down on the car like a big white kamikaze. He'd circle the car until Darryl blew the horn. Then one of us would come out on the front porch and chase the chicken down the driveway. Darryl would haul his instruments out and run for the door.

And all during the time we'd be playing music, the chicken would be up on the front porch, peering in through the old screen door. "They, law! Look at that darn bird," Darryl would say, "He's just waitin' on me to leave." And so, we'd play into the night when Darryl could be sure that the rooster would be safe asleep inside the chickenhouse. And when he'd leave, I'd also be able to fill up Hosepipe's food bowl.

Now, when I got to this point in the story one April Monday night in Manhattan, the editor of the magazine where I worked as a lowlife paste-up artist was not only listening intently, he was actually smiling at the more amusing, if not sadistic, parts of the story. It was only a fluke that we were there at that moment, throwing back adult beverages in the comfy confines of a midtown bar. It was my boss and art director, Zanzo's birthday, and though he was openly verbal with his disrespect, disregard, and outright disapproval of me, it had been strongly suggested by one of the magazine's assistant editors that it would be frowned upon if I didn't show up for this after-work alcoholic birthday salute.

Since our weekly magazine closed on Thursday nights and printed on Fridays, Monday was typically the night to do something after work, be it a concert or, in this case, a birthday drink-along. By the time I got to the bar, the editor and a cou-

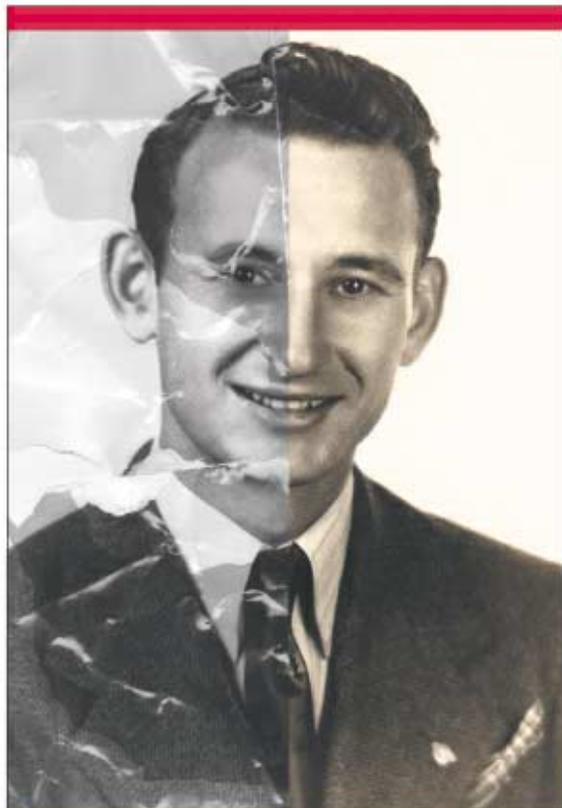
ple of writers, the flighty production girl from Long Island, the mailroom boys, and of course, Zanzo were already on their third round and were in various stages of giddiness with a touch of surly. "Well, well, here comes Jethro," said Zanzo when I slid up to the table, "Did you ask the bartender where they kept their white lightning?" Everyone snickered.

"Take your best shot," I thought.

"Anyway," said O'Toole, one of the magazine's chief writers, apparently in the middle of a celebrity story, "Bryce had always wanted a ranch or a farm. I think in his mind he envisioned himself as some sort of cowboy riding the range, roping cows or whatever those guys do for fun. And like I said, his real estate guy was more of a fan than a real estate guy. I guess he thought he'd really hit the big time when he scored Bryce as a client. He kept saying, 'Garden State Real Estate caters to all wants and needs.' And Bryce was saying, 'Money is no object...I just need to be happy with how the place, you know, looks and feels. And it also has to be somewhere in Jersey, 'cause well, that's where we, well, want to be. And of course, it has to have the ranch animals, because that's what's gonna make it, you know, really cool. We're thinking about doing a country-western album, and a ranch would be the perfect place to lay the tracks.'

"So Bryce and the boys all pile into the tour bus along with this geeky Garden State Real Estate agent and they're driving through the hills of New Jersey until, finally, in the middle of nowhere, they come to this dirt-and-gravel driveway, and they proceed to coax that big ol' tour

bus through the gate and up the lane. The bus goes as far as the driver dared to go on that muddy drive, but even then, it's too late, because it's already sinking to its back axle in this goopy Jersey quicksand. But Bryce don't care. He's jumping off the bus and hootin' and runnin' toward the barn along with the rest of the band. I don't know what he expected to find



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inside. Horses? Cows? I don't know. All I know is they all disappeared inside, and two seconds later, that crazy rotten barn door is flying off its hinges and Bryce and the boys are hightailin' back to the sinking bus. And right behind 'em is this bad-boy rooster right at their heels!"

"Let me get this straight," said Zanzo slurring his words ever so slightly, "They're running from a *chicken*?! Oh, is that too funny!"

I had been politely listening and stirring my Stolichnaya, but on the inside, I was a little more than just a bit amused by this table of urban dwellers sitting around grooving on a story about a big time rock star and his dealings with farm animals like they're some sort of alien beings.

"Good grief, Zanzo," I said. Everyone's head swiveled toward me in one synchronized motion. "That was, in fact, the correct and prudent response for those guys. You never *ever* should mess with an angry chicken. In fact, sometimes a chicken doesn't even have to be angry to give you a hard time."

Zanzo narrowed his eyes and scowled. "Now tell us again...why exactly are you here right now?" He tugged at his shaggy goatee and ran his hand over his eyes and into his hair as he always did when he was annoyed. After he repeated this gesture, his hair sprang back over and through his fingers like a big black frontal cowlick.

But it was too late for even Zanzo to stop me at that point. I was only one drink into the conversation, but the others had been busily fueling their states of mind for three quarters of an hour, and they weren't about to let my *I know a chicken story* hanging curve sail harmlessly over the plate.

"So," said the editor slowly and evenly, "you have experience with this kind of chicken?"

"It's not exactly something I'd put on my resume—as I'm sure Zanzo can attest to." Zanzo held up his hand to say something, but I pressed on. "I grew up in the suburbs of Nashville and never considered myself a country boy, but I *did* have relatives that lived on a farm on the Tennessee-Kentucky line, and they *did* have chickens."

"Cockledoodledoo!" said Zanzo. He

was wearing a rock t-shirt promoting a new band called *Anchor*. The shirt was pea-green with a large gold anchor on the front wrapped with dripping purple type that said: "Anchor—Let Me Down Easy."

I continued, "One Sunday afternoon we were all sitting on the porch at my uncle's farm, and my cousin Hank was in the yard behind the house throwing rocks at the chickens. Hank was also from the city."

"I wouldn't exactly call Nashville a city," said Zanzo.

"Anyway—Hank was throwing rocks at the hens, and, for the most part, missing with every throw, so it was pretty harmless. But behind him, one of the roosters came running up, claws out, wings flapping, and he jumped up and attached himself to Hank's Mighty Mouse T-shirt. We

One of the roosters came running up,
claws out, wings flapping,
and attached himself to
Hank's Mighty Mouse T-shirt.

heard him scream, and he came running at full tilt around the house beating at the rooster on his back yelling, 'Get him off! Get him off!' But none of the relatives moved from the porch, even after he'd circled the farmhouse five or six times. They all knew he'd been messing with the chickens, and that's what sometimes happened when you did that. That was the country way. In fact, my uncle was the only one who said anything, and all he said was, 'He kinda looks like an angel, don't he. I mean...an angel that's really out of control.'

"Oh, good grief," Zanzo sighed. But the others were scooting their chairs closer to the table and ordering more drinks.

"How did they detach the chicken?" asked the production girl.

"I honestly don't know." I said, "When we left that afternoon, Hank was still running around the house."

The editor had stopped laughing and was probing for a weak spot in the explanation. "It sounds like it was an isolated event." He pushed his glasses higher on the bridge of his nose.

"Actually, no it wasn't." I said. "I was first attacked by a chicken when I was five years old. And, as recently as a couple of years ago, I was looked on with contempt

by a chicken, who really, *really* wanted to attack me, but, well..."

"Well, what?"

"I guess he was chicken."

"Oh, good grief," said Zanzo, "He's taking you all for a ride. Some kind of ride. A hayride!"

"Let him finish," said the editor.

"Why would I make up a story about being attacked by a chicken?" I asked Zanzo.

He looked around the bar and stuck his index finger down into an empty shot glass and spun it like a top, and then he whispered something into O'Toole's ear. But O'Toole was waiting for some sort of explanation, so I continued.

"When I was five, my parents took me to visit my Uncle Carl, who had a chicken farm up in Iowa. Uncle Carl was in the process of inoculating all his chickens, so he sent me into one of the chickenhouses to get the next bird. This particular chicken had other ideas, I suppose, and decided to go for my

throat. Fortunately, he missed, but he did get a big hunk of my Mighty Mouse shirt."

"What is it with you and all those Mighty Mouse shirts?" Zanzo demanded.

"I just wanted to make sure you were paying attention." I told him. "Besides, that's not the major chicken story. The one from a few years ago is really more interesting."

"This happened in Nashville?" asked the editor, who was getting more and more interested with every drink.

"The *city* of Nashville?" Zanzo asked, sarcastically.

"No. Well, actually, it kind of *did* begin in Nashville, now that you mention it. I worked at this major theme park—you'd know it instantly if I told you the name—as a caricature artist."

"Cool," said one of the mailroom guys.

"Yeah. And all of the various caricature and portrait artists brought their own individual talents and, well, *quirks* to the table, as it were. And that's where I came to meet my friend, Hawkins, and that's how this particular chicken story begins—somewhere between Nashville and a farm in the mountains of East Tennessee."

And with that intro, I led them all from the table in a dark and smoky bar in midtown Manhattan, down the Valley Road

"Good luck in New York City," he wrote,
"Don't git runned over!"

and up the dusty driveway leading to the farmhouse. As I unfastened the story, I began to draw on a bar napkin with a ball-point pen that I had brought from the office. The story and the drawing began to intersect, so that by the time I got to the part about Darryl, a cartoon chicken was overtaking the whole napkin. What's more, with his shaggy goatee and cascading comb, he began to look like a cross between the big chicken and Zanzo, who at this point, had passed the alcoholic point of no return. He was even out of it enough to be the only one at the table who never eventually recognized that he and the chicken on the napkin were essentially one and the same.

I suppose the final chapter of the chicken story was fresh on my mind that night, and I guess that's why I pressed onward so aggressively with the story. It had only been a week or so since I had received the letter from Hawkins filling me in on the details. At that time I was still living in a one-room studio apartment in Brooklyn Heights on the street that ran parallel to the Promenade. Whenever I got mail from home, or in this case, a fat letter from East Tennessee, I would stop off and buy a bottle of beer and take it and the letter to the Promenade and make myself comfortable on one of the metal and concrete benches. I was always amused by the juxtaposition of the news from home against the dramatic backdrop view from the Promenade of the Brooklyn Bridge and lower Manhattan across the harbor.

The Hawk's letter was written, as always, on the same kind of artist's layout paper that we always had lying around the farmhouse. Ol' Bud had scrawled a pre-letter message at the top of the first page. "Good luck in New York City," he wrote, "Don't git runned over!"

And with no further ado, the Hawk began the letter:

"Howdy! Here we are at spring again. It was a long, hard winter and I am sure glad to see it getting warm again. Things have changed around here quite a bit since you left. First of all, Hosepipe is dead. Or, at least, we think he's dead. We found his

collar and some blood and fur over by the bridge as you get into the Park. Remember, we wrote 'Hosepipe' on his collar with the wood-burning set that we found when we first moved in.

"I talked to some of the Park Rangers about it and they first asked me *what in the world was your dog doing in a national park without a leash, didn't we know that was illegal?!!* I told them that he had recently gotten into the habit of chasing us in the car, but we usually picked up speed once we got out of the driveway and when he couldn't keep up with us, or see us down the road, he'd turn around and go back to the farm. It snowed back in January, though, and we were snowed in for nearly a week. We were about to go stir crazy, so when it finally got clear enough for us to get the truck out of the driveway, we decided to go into Gatlinburg and drink a few beers. Of course, Hosepipe took off after us, and with all the snow and ice, we couldn't outrun him.

"By the time we got up the first hill inside the park, we looked down, and there he was, right at the side of the truck. By the time we got to

the highway, we'd lost him, and we didn't think anymore about it until he still was missing the following day. The rangers asked where we last saw him and when I told them, they said that they'd been having trouble with the wild boars around that area. So I guess they must have got ol' Hosepipe. He wasn't good for much, but I sure have missed him. He was never what

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I would call an intelligent dog, so for all I know, he went right up to those wild pigs, thinking they'd run and squawk like chickens when he chased 'em. Imagine poor Hosepipe's surprise!!!

"Speaking of chickens, I've also got some news on that front. You remember our chicken never jumped on any of us that was living here at the farm. He jumped on everyone else, or at least he threatened to. The whole valley was scared of him! Even Darryl quit coming around.

"Well, one day I was at the farm by myself, and I was on my hands and knees trying to look under the porch for a fishing pole. Remember the time Hosepipe was sniffing the hook on one of our poles and got it stuck in his nose? The barb was jammed up into one nostril, and the other end stuck out of his snout like the front-end piece of a combat jet. He ran around the yard like a banshee and somewhere along the way the pole got lost. I thought maybe it had ended up under

the house. Well anyway, next thing I know, that fool rooster was on my back like he wanted a ride or something. It surprised me alright, but I reached up there behind me and caught him by his scrawny neck and I took him into the chickenhouse. Once inside the chickenhouse, I found a bag—I believe it was the same one Sgt. Francis used to bring us the chicken—and I stuffed him inside. Ol' Bud had a farmer friend at the other end of the valley who had some chickens, so I took him over there and asked if he had any use for him. I did warn him about the rooster's aggressive tendencies, but he just humored me the way all these old time locals do us city boys. 'Don't worry, we'll take good care of him,' he told me. Ha!

"The farmer and his wife went to that little Baptist church in the middle of the valley. About a week after our chicken went to live with them, the Baptist preacher's wife drove out to their place to get some homemade crabapple jam from the farmer's wife. She was a prize-winning crabapple jam-maker. Anyway, the preacher's wife was walking from her car up the stone sidewalk, when the chicken appeared from out of nowhere, and he began to do that weird sideways flapping

thing he always did. Of course, the woman was terrified, and she began running as fast as an older plump lady in high heels can possibly go. The chicken stayed right at her heels, pecking at her nylons, and he eventually chased her into the farmer's barn. She climbed the ladder into the hayloft and was trapped there until the farmer's wife happened to see the car down in the drive and wandered around the yard until she heard the screams from the barn. She had been trapped up there in the hayloft for a good three hours and was quite hysterical by the time they got her down.

"Of course, the farmer's wife was very embarrassed and wanted to have the chicken executed right there on the spot, but the farmer said that he would take care of it in his own way. I think he secretly

"The preacher's wife was walking up the stone sidewalk when the chicken appeared from out of nowhere."

admired the way the chicken had held that woman at bay, but naturally, he didn't tell his wife that. He quietly caught and boxed the rooster and took him to his brother-in-law's up in northeastern Tennessee, right on the Virginia line. His brother-in-law was a serious chicken farmer. He had thousands of chickens. He was also amused by this particular chicken's pluck. (Or should I say cluck?) Now, all the chicken had to do all day was walk around and act tough and service all the hens he could corner. It was chicken heaven.

"Every morning this chicken farmer would get up at the crack of dawn, and he and his trusted German Shepherd would herd the chickens into various chicken-yards for their morning breakfast. The farmer was particularly proud of this German Shepherd because he had trained him from a pup to be a world-class chicken dog. He was always gentle with the chickens and had for nearly a dozen years been an invaluable assistant to the farmer. The dog's talents were widely known throughout the county and the entire region, and he had been written up several times in various local newspapers. I guess that's why it was such a shock to this kindly German Shepherd to have this crazy

rooster attack him for no apparent reason.

The dog's reaction was swift and severe—he killed the chicken within a few seconds. But somehow, that wasn't enough. He went on to kill at least another 12 or 15 other chickens before the farmer could subdue him. His career came to one screeching, feather-ridden halt..."

As I relayed the dramatic end of the chicken story to the people at the table who were still coherent, I realized at that moment that it was a turning point in my stay in New York. And sure enough, in the weeks and months that followed, my life and duties at the magazine changed drastically. Naturally, Zanzo was still insolent and surly, but the rest of the office began to treat me somewhat differently. And more and more, *Zanzo the Chicken* caricatures would somehow show up around the office. Some of them were in color, and most of them were better drawn than the first one, but that original one drawn in that dark and smoky bar was

always the hands-down favorite. At least, that was the one the editor remembered and laughed about sometime later when he called me into his office and gave me Zanzo's job.

I stayed with the magazine for five years, until after many years as a top record trade magazine, it finally gave up the ghost and died a slow, painful death. After a respectful period of mourning, most of us managed to find other jobs. Some found great jobs. I don't know what happened to Zanzo. He had been long gone from the magazine at the point of its demise. I found a job as art director for a large publishing company out on Long Island and spent my last two years in New York doing a negative commute from Brooklyn Heights out to the small suburban town where the company's headquarters were located. After six months of being held hostage by the timetables of the Long Island Railroad, I appealed to my dad in Tennessee to find me a car.

"Not really a good car," I had told him, "The roads up here are unbelievably bad. I really need a *disposable* car. When a car breaks down on the BQE or the Long Island Expressway, by the time you get off the highway and call for help and get back

to the car, it's already been trashed. It's like mobile piranhas scour the roads. And once a car is trashed, it continues to deteriorate a little more each day until after a week or so, there's nothing left but a burned-out shell. I need a car that, if it breaks down, I can just walk away from it. A disposable car."

That's how I came to be driving a 22-year-old Buick. It rolled off the assembly line one bright morning when I was laboring over a third-grade spelling test with a thick red pencil. My father found it for me 20 years later in a Nashville used car lot. He had the brakes fixed and put a new set of tires on it, and I flew down that Fall and drove it back to New York. It was a big, gold, lumbering two-door, and it did quite nicely on the mean streets and expressways of the city. Sure, there were minor problems, but all-in-all, it took the cold winters and the giant potholes in stride. In fact, the car adjusted to the urban lifestyle much better than I had. I was beginning to develop a chronic bad attitude.

Before, rude people had always amused me, but now they were starting to tick me off. The final straw came one afternoon in the food market around the corner from where I lived in Brooklyn Heights. I was in the "10 items or less" line, waiting behind a man who looked to be in his late seventies or early eighties.

The woman in front of him was nonchalantly pulling out her twentieth item, and he turned to me with a sad smile and said very quietly, "I really wish they wouldn't put a sign up like that if they're not going to enforce it."

The market manager just happened to be walking by when the old man uttered these words and he stopped in his tracks, as if he had been expecting someone to say something to that effect, and now that it was indeed uttered, his life had finally taken on meaning. "What did you say?" he demanded. He was a short and stocky red-faced man, and he was wearing a pea-green, duck-billed cap with an anchor on the front and script on the back that said, "The Way All Frozen Foods Should Be."

The old man met his gaze. "I said, 'They really shouldn't put up a sign like that if they're not going to enforce it.'"

The manager leaned in close and said, "Look, Pops, in the time it takes for you to complain, we'll already have you and your Geritol checked out. So, if you can't stomach our store policy, you can take your chump-change business elsewhere. Maybe you should consider 'Geezers 'R' Us.'"

I suppose I should have just dropped what I was buying and walked out, but I guess I was too taken aback at the manager's attitude. And besides, I told myself, the old guy in front of me meekly paid for his two or three items and quietly left the store. Why should I get involved? Still, I did a slow burn, and a few days later when I saw the same manager with the same silly cap crossing in front of me at an intersection, without thinking I jammed my foot down on the old Buick's acceler-

Somewhere, buried underneath, was a cigar box with a cocktail napkin tattooed with a rough, ballpoint pen caricature of a chicken.

ator and aimed the car at the obnoxious little man. He initially froze like a deer in the headlights, but managed to dance out of the way at the very last second. "What on earth was that all about?" I thought as I turned the corner onto my street. At that point, I knew I had to get out of New York before I killed somebody or somebody killed me. I had survived for seven years in the city, the last two with the help of the stately Buick, but I saw the escape window starting to close.

So, not too long after my attempted murder of the market manager, I gave notice at the publishing company. After I had worked my final two weeks, I said my goodbyes to my friends in the city and out on the island at various lunches, dinners and drop-bys.

Then one hot Saturday night, my father flew up to help me move. We outfitted the Buick with an industrial-strength trailer hitch and rented a one-way U-Haul trailer that we thought the old car could handle. We then parked it in front of my place, and packed it to the gills in one non-stop, six-hour shift. We junked most of the furniture, keeping only my guitars and banjo, my old bed and dresser, the pieces of my stereo that still worked, 1127 of my record albums, 11 crates of clothes, and a single

cigar box.

The Buick bottomed out on the bricks of Canal Street, and by the time we cleared the Holland Tunnel, the muffler was bouncing off the road, throwing sparks in all directions, until we set it free in the abandoned Garden State Real Estate parking lot in New Jersey. We lost one of the windshield wipers in a midnight torrential rainstorm on a turnpike in Pennsylvania that was under construction and had been narrowed to the width of a good-sized sidewalk for a dismal 70 or 80 miles. (I had nightmares about throwing continuous gutter balls at some haunted Pennsylvania bowling alley for several months after driving that particular stretch of highway.) The other windshield wiper made it as far as the north end of the

Shenandoah Valley, where the sunrise lit up the rainclouds and somehow made them disappear. The thermostat made it as far as the East Tennessee Texaco station just outside

of Knoxville.

"By the way, whatever happened to that crazy chicken?" my father asked as we pulled the freshly-thermostated Buick back up onto the interstate.

"It's funny you asked," I said glancing into the rearview mirror. Behind me, I saw the U-Haul bumping up and down, filled with all my worldly belongings, and somewhere buried underneath, a cigar box with a cocktail napkin tattooed with a rough, ballpoint pen caricature of a chicken. Behind that, I could still see a pea-green-suited man in front of the shrinking Texaco, crawling on his hands and knees, as if he were looking for a contact lens, or for that matter, a tiny hole to China.

But my immediate attention was directed straight ahead, as I squinted at the big yellow-orange sunset just beyond the windshield. It gleamed off the hood of the old Buick like a golden eye and transformed the interstate into an electric, day-glo ribbon, rolling westward to Nashville and beyond.

Loosening the Bible Belt

A memoir by K. Ralph Devereaux

As a boy raised as a Methodist in the rural American South, I had a lot of interesting experiences and adventures, but one recurring event that I cherished and anxiously awaited was that wonderful phenomenon we called the Camp Meeting.

The Camp Meeting had its beginnings among the southern states during the birth of America some two hundred years ago. Methodism was gaining a foothold in the American Colonies with the blessings of John Wesley and people were “turning to Jesus.”

Organized churches were literally few and far between, so Methodist Circuit Riders would ride on horseback to certain locations and hold preaching services. It was in these hamlets and hollers that the message of God’s love was preached and many Camp Meetings were born from the womb of that frontier spirit.

The event was seasonal and was held several times a year, usually revolving around the planting and harvesting of crops. In the spring, after the seeds were lovingly placed in the soil and began poking their little heads out of the earth, the crops were “laid by.” That is, the crops were weeded by hoeing and fertilized and given time to “get established.”

The time of waiting for the gift of soil,

sun, rain was enjoyed at Camp Meeting. The wagons were hitched, provisions were packed for a several week stay, and the family was loaded into the wagon. This

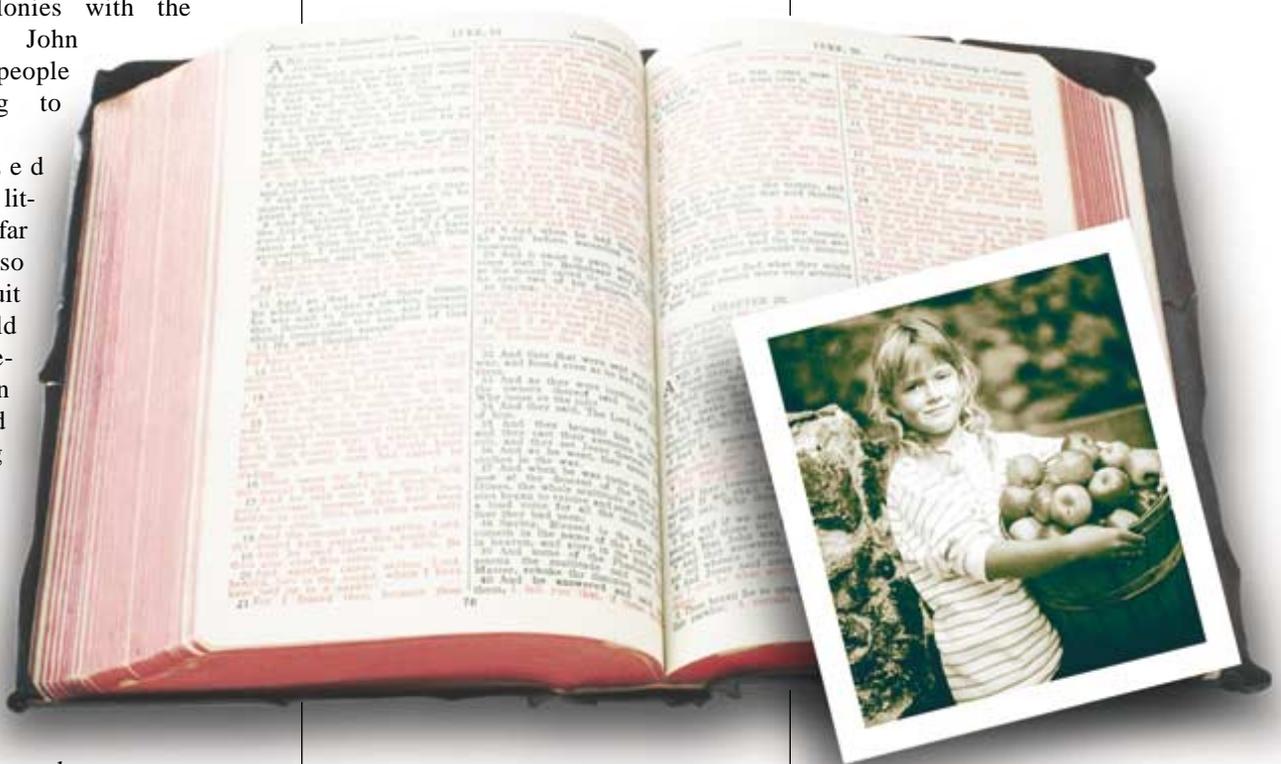
litany of preparation was experienced throughout the region until hundreds were gathered at the “Arbor” (an open-air taber-

were scurrying with activity.

The Camp Meeting experience was one of smells, sounds and emotions, but mostly food.

In the early hours of the new day, you could smell the fragrance of the sparkling dew that greeted the grasses, trees and bushes with a sweet good morning kiss.

Soon, in the distance, the busy hands of kitchen dwellers would be crafting the first meal of the day. Fresh eggs were fried in bacon grease; biscuits were coaxed and



The event was seasonal and was held several times a year, usually revolving around the planting and harvesting of crops.

petted until they obeyed the delicate touch of their trainers. They would then rise up on their hind legs in a 475-degree oven and roll over for a pat of butter and drizzle of cane syrup.

The grits would be boiled, salted and stirred until they were just right. The preserves from last year’s blackberry pickens would grace the table in a

Mason jar with a reusable ring lid that often subtitled for a child’s bracelet. The

nacle) and the “tents” (temporary wooden housing which surrounded the tabernacle)

aroma of bacon frying in the cast-iron skillet would convince anyone that they would starve to death unless they got a chance to eat at least five slices.

And then there was the brown gravy and sausage.

How was it possible to take ordinary self-rising flour, a little bacon grease, a pinch of salt and just the right amount of milk and make a topping for a hand-crafted biscuit which would produce something so good that it would make your eyes roll back in your head? Something so remarkable that it would cause you to emit a staccato moaning from the back of the throat that sounds a lot like Andy Griffin at the end of a Maxwell House Coffee commercial?

And speaking of coffee...coffee was the "descant smell" that floated above all other smells in a harmonic blending that added the final "amen" to the song of anticipation of a Camp Meeting Breakfast.

Hands were held, and prayers were uttered around a roughly-built table situated in the back of the tent on a saw dust floor. The adults sat at the head and foot of the table, and the children lined up on the long benches on either side.

Granddaddy would sit at his place around the table in his freshly-washed coveralls hanging over his best shirt. Scarred from years of standing against the elements after plowing acres of rocky soil, he would bow his head and offer a prayer of thanksgiving over the food and for the lives of the young and old who were gathered around the table once again.

The only thing better than a Camp Meeting breakfast was the overwhelming sense of love and the secure peacefulness that caressed the hearts of those who had come to Camp Meeting to worship God with friends and family. As good as the table set before them was, it could not compare to the table that God had set for the worshippers.

They would share this gift for the next two to three weeks. There was a generous portion of faith, with sides of song and prayer. Warm hugs would fill baskets in the center of the table and pats on the back would make the heart glad.

And for dessert, a time at the altar where tears and yearning for a better life, help with the chores back home and God's protection over the children, would be savored until late into the summer nights. After a wonderful meal at the table of

God, all there was left to do is to loosen the Bible Belt.

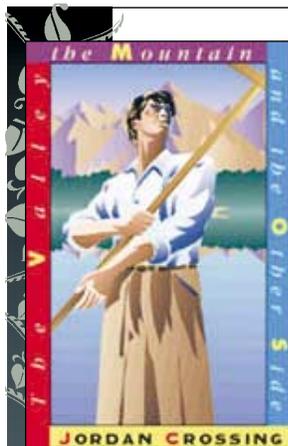
Camp Meeting Chicken Casserole

- 2 to 4 c. cooked and diced chicken
- 3 boiled eggs
- 1 c. mayonnaise
- 1 can sliced water chestnuts
- 1 can cream of chicken soup

Mix all ingredients. Top with crushed potato chips. Bake at 350 degrees for 20 minutes.

ralphd@cannonchurch.org

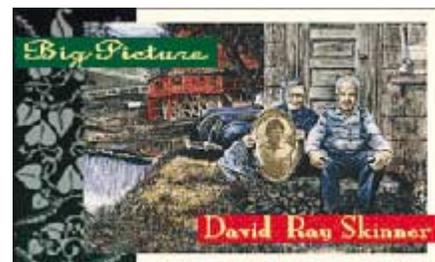
Ralph Devereaux is a Methodist minister in Snellville, Georgia. Two of his passions are preaching and motorcycles.



Songs of the South

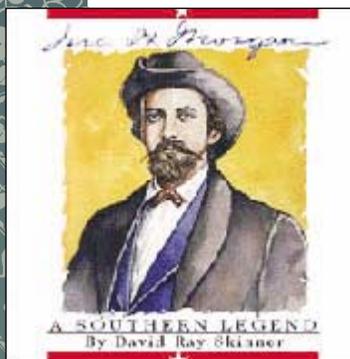
Electric Quilt Music was founded to serve as an alternative source for creating and distributing recordings, with an emphasis on southern music.

The music varies from the historic overtones of

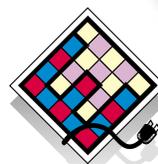
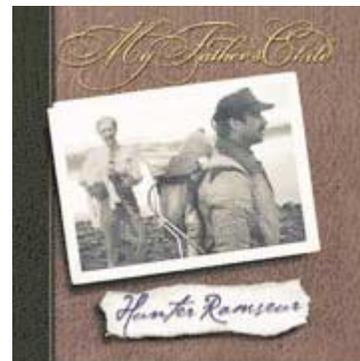


John Hunt Morgan: A Southern Legend to the gospel rock of Jordan Crossing's *The Valley, the Mountain, and the Other Side* with a side trip to the Southern Gothic territory of David Ray

Skinner's *Big Picture* and the touching sentiments of Hunter Ramseur's *My Father's Child*. Three of the albums, *John Hunt Morgan*, *Jordan Crossing*, and *Big Picture* are available on cassette for \$8.99 each (plus \$2 per cassette for shipping



and handling), and *John Hunt Morgan*, and *My Father's Child* are available on CD for \$13.99 (plus \$2 for shipping and handling).



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The Rising Popularity of Biscuits

A food commentary by Nelda Hill

I was raised to believe in the efficacy of biscuits as surely as the power of positive thinking or the stealth of Jesus in returning to earth when I least expected it. Biscuits have marked both the daily and the occasional events of my life. They've eased me into my leave takings and trumpeted my homecomings. They've kept me on speaking terms with my family, anger melting like butter in the face of a hot biscuit.

Folks not from around here don't much understand a Southerner's affection for biscuits, but then I don't much understand

the fuss about bagels or muffins. I thought I understood about croissants but I'm not so sure anymore. I'm reminded of the time my father ate his first and only croissant. He said he reckoned it was all right, if that's what you wanted to eat, but when would the biscuits be done?

My love of biscuit eating in no way corresponds with my ability to make them. I don't make good biscuits. A good biscuit is light as a Georgia "r" and as flaky as the paint on the west side of my house. A good biscuit sops gravy without crumbling and holds molasses like a teaspoon. My biscuits are not like that.

Still, I am a biscuit snob. I would rather do without as eat inferior biscuits, which includes most of what I make, most of what is found in restaurants, and all canned, mixed or frozen, at least when I know that's what they are. I have access to mighty good biscuits so why should I settle for less.

It used to concern my mother that I can't make good biscuits. "No man wants to marry a woman who can't make a decent biscuit," she said. We had biscuit making lessons: Sift your flour...How

much? Oh, about a sifterfull...now cut in your shortening...How much? Until it feels right...



Best I can tell, Southerners have been eating biscuits since day one.

When I set up housekeeping 24 years ago, my mother presented me with a pastry blender wrapped in paper towels. She allowed as I wasn't quick enough to make biscuits with my hands and rather than worry my biscuit dough to leather, I could use the pastry blender. She tried to sound upbeat and encouraging, using a voice

people use when speaking to the desperately ill.

Years passed and I discovered that most of the world got along without biscuits, that, in fact, one could subsist quite well without hot bread on the table most meals. I even took up with a man who never even considered my inability to make biscuits when he didn't marry me.

Not long ago, I was sitting around the dinner table with my family--my mother, my brothers, their wives, my nieces and

nephews. We were having our after-dinner biscuits and jelly and it came to me that except for my mother, nobody at that table made biscuits, not scratch biscuits at any rate. My great nieces and nephews might never witness their grandmothers or aunts slapping the sides of a sifter like a tambourine. They might never feel the excitement of Mama running into the dining room holding a pan of biscuits not a minute removed from the oven, burning her fingers so that everyone's first biscuit might be piping hot. It made me sad.

I know that if I had to choose between living the life I have and bak-

ing hot biscuits every night for some Joe and our children, I'd choose what I have but I can't help feeling as if something valuable is being lost. It's like going back to the woods where you

played as a child and finding they've built a school there. Schools are fine, just not in your woods.

I started waxing poetic about biscuit dough being the tie that binds. Rich, poor, black, white, schooled, unschooled, churched, irreligious - - biscuits seem to be the one thing, other than humidity, that

Southerners have in common. Next to jazz, they may be the South's great contribution to civilization.

Looking around, I can tell that we all still eat biscuits, but how many of us actually make biscuits? Is everybody like me, on the biscuit dole, letting our mothers, grandmothers, and The Cracker Barrel furnish us with biscuits while we contribute nothing to perpetuate the tradition? Is biscuit eating a tradition that needs to be perpetuated? Biscuits are fattening. A one-ounce biscuit has 103 calories and 4.7 grams of fat. In a region where 20% of the people are overweight, shouldn't we all be eating melba toast?

Biscuits have been around for a long time. *The Oxford English Dictionary* records the earliest usage as 1330. From the 16th to the 18th century, the regular form of the word was *bisket*, and *The OED* goes on to say, "the current biscuit is a senseless adoption of the modern French spelling without the French pronunciation." So there.

Best I can tell, Southerners have been eating biscuits since day one. According to John Egerton, in the late 18th, early 19th centuries, people leavened their biscuits by beating the fire out of them, hence the name "beaten biscuits." It took hours and considerable muscle to beat enough air into the flour, lard and milk to make the dough rise in the oven. Once slavery was abolished, the practice died.

By then, baking powder and baking soda had been invented which revolutionized both the making and taste of biscuits. They became light and fluffy rather than flat and hard. For those harboring a taste for the old beaten biscuit, a dough-kneading machine was invented but by and large, beaten biscuits are a thing of the past.

The next major event in biscuit history was the introduction of self-rising flour. Martha White, one of the two major flour companies in the South started making flour with the baking powder and soda already in it just after World War II. It was, in effect, the first biscuit mix.

Speaking of flour, good biscuits must, I repeat, must, be made from Southern milled wheat. I remember this from my biscuit making lessons. My mother said never use anything but Martha White flour

when making biscuits. I didn't take this admonition too seriously because I grew up in Nashville, which was home to Martha White and I figured she was just partial to the hometown team.

There is a reason though and I learned it from reading John Egerton's books on Southern cooking. The biscuits we remember so fondly were all but certainly made from wheat grown and milled in the South. Southern wheat is a soft winter wheat, producing a soft flour just dandy for quick breads. Midwestern wheat, by contrast, while also a winter wheat, is harder, due to the climate. It produces dense, heavy breads, the last thing you want in a biscuit.

I discovered that The Library of Congress has catalogued 37 titles under the subject "biscuits" as compared to 20 under "bagels." The periodical database, Infotrac, has indexed 335 articles on biscuits since 1980. So a bit of paper has been spent on the subject.

Did you get to butter your biscuit
before or after the blessing?

Once I caught up on biscuit history, I started looking for statistics on biscuit consumption. I haven't found any yet but I haven't looked real hard. I'm more into anecdotal evidence which is what separates the scientists from the English majors.

I decided to take a survey. It is in no way scientific - - in fact, the respondents are mostly my pals. I wanted to find out if any of them make biscuits and if they do, why they've never served me some when I come over to eat. I know they make risotto, and couscous, and scones, and any number of dishes they've read about in the fancy cooking magazines they all seem to read. Do any of them make biscuits though?

They seemed rather surprised by my question, as if I'd asked, do you ever drink water? Not only do a number of my pals make biscuits, they make them fairly often and from scratch. Not every night but at least once a week or several times a month.

Those who don't make biscuits still eat them, and some make no secret of their willingness to use canned or frozen rather

than do without. One gal said if she had to have good biscuits she got her mother or sister to make them, otherwise she used frozen which were better than any she made herself.

We got into long raps about method. There are those who cut the flour and shortening with a fork and those who use their hands (nobody uses a pastry blender although most of the recipes tell you to). There are the milk dribblers and there are those who make a flour well and pour the milk down it then pull the flour in from the sides. They have flour opinions; being East Tennesseans, they mostly swear by White Lily made in Knoxville but they will allow Martha White as second choice. No other flour will do and they know that without knowing a blessed thing about winter wheat.

Then we got into the eating of biscuits - - do you crumble your biscuit into the gravy or pour the gravy on top? Do you stir your butter and molasses together or load them separately onto the biscuit? There's a lot to know about a person when you know these things.

I feel better about the future of the biscuit for having discussed it. Are my friends representative of the South as a whole? I like to think so, but I also know, in most respects, they are kindly odd.

My last question in the biscuit survey was: Did you get to butter your biscuit before or after the blessing? Methodists tend to butter before, Baptists and Church of Christ make you wait. My friend, Tom, who makes biscuits twice a week, is from a family that didn't bless each and every meal, which I am sure explains his avidity.

I am a preacher's granddaughter, and my mother and aunts knew a thing or two about long-winded praying. They slipped the biscuits in the oven as the last head bowed. They folded their hands piously, knowing the prayer could run on 8-12 minutes and the biscuits still come out hot and fresh. Amen.

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Nelda Hill lives in Knoxville, Tennessee. Besides writing she occasionally plays a mean mountain dulcimer in a bluegrass band.