

THE GRAHAM GANG

JIMMIE L. BARRETT

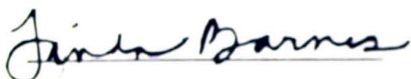
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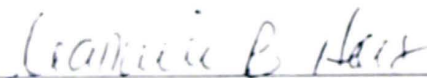
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THE GRAHAM GANG

A Creative Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

Austin Peay State University

By

Jimmie L. Barrett

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ABSTRACT

This is a work of fiction in the tradition of the American local colorists. It explores the adventures and personalities of a group of young people growing up in the southeastern United States during the 1940's and 1950's. Although the geographical location is real, the characters are the products of the author's imagination except for certain details pertaining to the main character who is loosely based upon a living person.

The Graham Gang is a journal of a time period and a lifestyle which have largely disappeared from the American landscape. Its purpose is to preserve the memory of an innocent and peaceful period of America's rural past, and to entertain the modern reader with a glimpse of a world that has been left behind as America has moved on.

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INTRODUCTION

You wouldn't be shocked if you went there now. They haven't paved paradise and put up a parking lot or anything like that. In fact, it all still looks pretty much the same: the outer geography is intact. The railroad track is still functional, and standing by the crossbar sign and looking straight over at Graham, you'll see that the store and the old homeplace are still in good shape. The catalpa and maple trees have grown to magnificence. Of course, the water tower and the coal bin that used to stand beside the tracks are completely gone, as are the remnants of the old telegraph shed that connected Graham to the world back in the old days. The mighty steam engines are gone, too, that used to stop and huff in coal and water while Sonny cowered in his "fort" on Poke Chop Hill, then back up, chuffing, slowly up the long grade toward Dickson, then come ROARING back down, full head of steam boiling and black smoke billowing from the stack, whistle screeching. The South Central Line went swooping on to Columbia while Sonny ducked and quivered on Poke Chop Hill.

Mill Creek still runs here, full and freezing cold as ever, but sparkling clear now. It used to be black as the Styx in the old days, when the wood charcoal plant still operated out in Wrigley. The spout spring is still spurting out below the trestle cave, though the old pipe has rusted out and been replaced by a plastic one. All up and down Mill Creek Road the scenes are familiar and it might almost feel like time's stood still. But if you stand by the track crossing right in the heart of Graham, in plain sight of the Store, you can't hear a sound: no kids

hollering, no chickens flapping and squibbling, no dogs hounding rabbits, or drifting adult laughter from inside the Store. Hardly anybody lives here now: a few old folks scattered up and down the creek in old log cabins they have covered with clapboard; a few camp-houses used once or twice a year by families down from Nashville "roughing it" for a weekend, or by a few out-of-county deer hunters in their season.

So even though it looks the same outside, Graham's innards are considerably altered. But once it was different. Once a people lived here that tromped all the grass off of Poke Chop Hill and made this little community hum like a buzz saw. Back in the "good ole days" when the stories you're about to read happened, Graham was a typical rural community of America's "Golden Era." The 1940's and 50's were boom times for these parts. There was plenty of work on and around the railroad: cutting ties, laying track, and cutting wood for the plant at Wrigley. There were several saw mills doing business here then, and for those who wanted more, there was an empty bus seat and an assured production job waiting for Tennesseans in Detroit. We had a good reputation up there in the car plants. We were "dependable, hard-working, and not uppity."

The Graham Store did a lively business back then, with the railroad workers and road builders stopping in for a bologna sandwich and a cold RC for dinner, and the twenty or so families who lived up and down Mill Creek that could buy the grocery staples they needed from Papa Clark on credit and pay after their tobacco crop came in.

There were many peripheral characters who wove this story's tapestry, but it was the kids from four main families that formed the Graham Gang: the Cantrels, the Peters, the Logansons, and the Kents.

The Cantrels lived about fifty yards down the road from Sonny. Bill was two years older than Tony, who was just Sonny's age. These three formed the brave and witless core of the Gang. Whenever a caper involved locomotion, free-falling, fire-building, or bloodshed, then you could bet these three were the brains behind the plan. The Cantrels' oldest brother, Wayne, was too mean and evil to be part of their Gang. He was a one-man-gang a smart person avoided. Mrs. Cantrel was the first person to give Sonny a homemade ham and biscuit, and Mr. Cantrel was Graham's drunkard, who flat knew how to make moonshine.

The Peters lived on down Mill Creek Road about a quarter mile. Bobby and Donnie always had good bicycles with baskets on them, so they generally provided get-away services. They were both exceptional baseball players; they owned two of the three mitts which the Graham Gang counted as inventory. Their sister, Kathleen, was one year younger than Sonny, but no bawlin' betty. She could bat a home run and was the gang's best tree climber, so she fulfilled a vital role besides being the token female.

The Logansons lived on out Highway 48 in a big old house with tar shingles on it. There were nine of these kids but most of them were too young to run with the Gang. Jimmy and Jerry were twins about Bill's age and Jackie was a year older, which made him the oldest member. But since he was always a little slow, he fit in with the schemes of his younger friends just fine. The Loganson boys were all good swimmers and

their daddy had an old jon-boat he let them use to paddle around in Mill Creek. Their ownership of such a vessel as this put them in the catbird seat when the Gang had piracy on its mind.

Finally, the Kents were Sonny's grandparents and they owned the Graham Store. Sonny was the only child in this house during the week, but on the weekend his many uncles and aunts and cousins would come down to the country and temporarily overflow the fort on Poke Chop Hill.

Sonny wasn't really the leader of the Gang, at least not all the time. Different people led at different times, according to the talents required by the caper, but Sonny was definitely in on most of the planning and he was the one who could usually tell about the event to everyone's satisfaction when tales were being told around the campfire after the deed was done.

The world has moved on since the time you'll read about. The people have scattered to the earth's ends. But when you stand on the porch of the old Store, hear the catalpa seed pods rattle in the breeze, and hear the tame whistle of the diesel trains hauling wood-chips as they slowly grind through the crossing, you can believe that the Graham Gang is still alive, and something still lives here that bears witness to this story.

CAPPIN' CORN

One winter night not long after Sonny moved to Graham, he was sitting in Mama Kent's lap while she rocked by the wood stove. The living room was lit with the yellow glow of the coal-oil lamps and Sonny could hear the sleet skittering across the window panes of the old house. Drafts seeped in around the door and window frames, making the lamp flames shimmer sometimes and giving his toes a little icy nip now and again.

His top part was warm and comfy snuggled on Mama Kent's lap, but he wasn't quite ready to go to sleep. He'd only been here a few days and he still wasn't used to the creaks and squeaks of this house. Going to bed alone in the dark back bedroom was scaring him quite a lot. So he sat there, yawning, fighting to keep his eyes open, when Mama Kent said, "Sonny, you want me to cap you some corn?"

Now he had no idea what that was, but by now he'd figured out that this woman would never steer him wrong. "Sure," he said, and they went into the old kitchen where Mama Kent poked the embers in the cook stove, added a stick or two, and set a heavy iron skillet on top. Then she took a lamp into the pantry and picked out several heaping cups of hard seed corn from the sack she kept there. They sat at the kitchen table and carefully picked out any trash and bad kernels they saw, then Mama Kent put them in a bowl and poured two dippers of water over them and sloshed them around good. She poured the water off into the hog's slop-bucket and took the bowl over to the stove.

The skillet was good and hot by this time, so she scooped a big

dollop of lard from the covered bucket that stood beside the counter. It melted fast, filling the air with that rich brown aroma that would forever after remind Sonny of her kitchen. The water clinging to the corn kernels sizzled and crackled as they hit the hot grease.

"Now you stand back, Sonny. I don't want you to get splattered."

Sonny watched perched on a tall stool several feet away. Mama Kent stirred the corn around, coating the kernels throughly with the grease, then she slapped an iron lid on the skillet and poked up the fire. She gave Sonny a gummy grin as she took a pot holder and, grasping the skillet handle, started shaking the whole thing vigorously back and forth over the heat spot.

Just as Sonny was about to laugh at the way this motion made her arms jiggle, he heard a loud POP! in the skillet, followed by another and another. Soon the whole thing was cracking to beat the band, and an incredible yellow smell was filling the air. Sonny knew he was in for a treat.

Mama Kent took the skillet off the stove and turned the damper down so the embers would lie till morning. She lifted the skillet lid and a ball of steam roiled up to the dim ceiling. There, before Sonny's bulging eyes, lay a heap of golden shining kernels with a few white nibbles peppered through. Mama Kent salted the capped corn and poured it into a big blue bowl. Taking up the lamp and the bowl she said, "Come on, Sonny," and headed back to the living room.

Mama Kent, Papa Kent, and Sonny sat close together in cane bottomed chairs by the wood stove in the living room and munched, crunched, talked, and laughed, picked the hard little corn skins out of

their teeth, and listened to the wind whipping the maple limbs against the window.

When the bowl was empty and Sonny went to bed that night, he lay a minute feeling Mama Kent's soft kiss goodnight on his cheek and tasting the corn on his breath. He sighed, pulled up his quilt, and tumbled into sleep.

A ROLLING STONE

Sonny's Uncle Phil came up to visit one weekend in early summer. He was a favorite with Sonny because he always brought him some sort of interesting or useful present. Once it was a harmonica, once an empty turtle shell, neat stuff like that. On this particular day he tossed a flat, black package at Sonny that was surprisingly heavy. Sonny looked it over, sniffed it.

"It's a tire innertube, Sonny," Uncle Phil grinned. "You can blow it up and roll it around the yard, or take it down to the swimmin' hole to float on. Come on, let's take it over here to the Store and get 'er blowed up."

Sonny watched eagerly as Uncle Phil and Papa Kent inflated the tube. When it was tight and bouncy, Phil gave it a good push down the sloping backyard and it rolled for the longest way until it fell over. All right! Sonny spent the rest of the morning rolling the tube around the yard and up and down the road, all the while running like a maniac beside it, giving it an occasional push, and being very entertained.

After a while, though, he was tired and he sat down in the front yard under the maple tree. From this vantage point, the lawn sloped gently, beginning the long grade down across the road through Burnett's field right to the creek. Sonny steadied his tube and, setting the angle of it for maximum distance, gave it a stout shove. It rolled smoothly through the grass onto the road, only stopping when it hit the big hickory tree at the upper right corner of the field.

Sonny thought about it. He wondered if he could ride that wild tube? He ran down and retrieved his vehicle and came back to starting

position. He leaned the tube against the maple tree and took off his sneakers. Then he straddled the tube, sitting inside the hole. Carefully, he lifted and folded first one foot, then the other up inside the cockpit. When he was packed in there like jelly inside a donut, he steadied himself against the maple and managed to twist himself into position for take off. He took a deep breath and shoved hard against the tree.

He braced his hands on the rubber curve above his head as the tube started rolling. With the extra stability his weight gave it, the tube was holding a remarkably steady course and picking up speed like crazy. Inside the black hole, Sonny was pushing up with his hands and down with his feet, trying to keep from hollering and wetting his pants. The world flashed by in a kaleidoscopic blur as the tube raced across the road and easily surmounted the slight bank at the field's edge.

Sonny felt like he'd ridden at least as far as Nunnelly and he was beginning to wonder how he was gonna stop this machine. His eyes were crossing with the crazy dancing patchwork of colors speeding by, and his head was definitely beginning to swim. Just when he feared he might keep rolling on to Columbia . . . THUNK! The tube hit the hickory tree and Sonny squirted out and flipped flat on his back. He lay there in Burnett's field, staring up at the whirling blue sky until he sobered up a little. Boy Howdy! Wait till he showed Bill and Tony how to do this! With a whoop, he jumped up, and grabbing his tube, he ran off down the road to the Cantrels' house.

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WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

On rainy spring days, the clouds would belly up grey as geese and pour down. The clear, cool rain would tat on the tin roof and gush down the gutters, coursing down the ditches and puddling in the hard-packed chert road in front of the Store. Sonny was sitting on the porch on just such a day, holding his bare feet under the rivulets of rain leaking through a hole in the gutter. Pretty soon he saw Bobby sloshing through the side yard, holding his big toy dumptruck under one arm and carrying a broken shovel in the other hand. "Come on, Sonny. Git yore bulldozer and bring the red wagon. Let's us go play Corps of Engineers."

Sonny ran inside to tell Papa Kent his plans. Then he ran next door where Mama Kent tied him into his green rain poncho. He ran to get the yellow toy bulldozer his mama had sent him for Christmas. As he came running back through the kitchen, Mama Kent stopped him and gave him an old rusted gardening trowel. "Here Sonny. Ya'll might need to dig a canal with this." She grinned and pinched his cheek.

"Thanks, Mama Kent," Sonny gave her a quick hug and dashed off the back porch. Pulling his Radio Flyer out from under the steps, he put his dozer and trowel in the wagon and headed around to the side of the Store where Bobby waited.

The boys ran and splashed a bit just because they felt good, then turned to the serious business of taming the raging river of run off rainwater gushing down the ditches. After several trips with the wagon

up to get gravel from around the railroad ties, the boys set to work damming the ditch to make a lovely reservoir where all manner of boats could be sailed. Their plan was that the water should only back up and fill the ditch beside the road, but as the rain kept pouring down and they kept piling rock on the dam, the water started seeping sideways, filling up the shallow yard around the Store. The land there was saucer shaped and completely bare of grass from the shading of the catalpa tree, the tromping of callused boy-feet, and the scratching of chickens.

Sonny and Bobby were building the lake at the edge of the garden, which put them around the corner of the Store and out of sight of the front Store yard. They were oblivious and happy, knew nothing of the watery havoc they were causing. They stopped and wiped their eyes, looking at their handiwork. "Why ain't this lake no deeper, Sonny?" Bobby asked. "It's rainin' cats and dogs. You'd think we'd have a foot of water back here in this deep ditch by now."

Sonny scratched his head under the poncho hood and hadn't come up with an answer when suddenly the air was rent by a holler. "SONNY! What in the world have you boys done?"

Bobby and Sonny ran up the road around the corner of the Store and pulled up short as they rounded the curve and saw the Store yard. It looked like a bayou. Water was everywhere, standing around the Store several inches deep, and more was pouring through a gap in the ditch at the corner of the road. Papa Kent was standing on the porch wiping his glasses and shaking his head. "Sonny, ya'll have dang near washed this place plumb away. Lord, this here yard will be a muddy mess tomorrow.

This here water has floated off my sawdust I had laid down here for a path."

The two boys stood in the rain, blinking up at him. "We're awful sorry, Papa Clark. We's buildin' us a lake. I don't know what coulda happened. We're awful sorry." Bobby nodded his agreement to the apology.

"Well, ya'll just un-dam that lake, and do it quick. Ain't no chance this here will drain, but maybe it'll soak in tonight. You boys'll have to help me spread that bale of straw around after while. Minnie's the one has to mop the Store and she won't vote for nuthin' that adds to the muddy boot tracks on her floor."

The two boys tore down the dam much faster than they had built it and threw the gravel back in the general direction of the railroad crossing. They looked at each other, appreciating their drowned-rat appearance.

"Well, it looks like it's lettin' up some," Sonny said.

"Yeah. I guess we engineered enough for one day."

"Almost too much for one day if you ask me. We're lucky Papa Kent didn't tan our hides."

"He couldn't get to us across that lake," Bobby giggled.

Sonny joined in the laugh but said, "Next time maybe we'd better just wade the puddles instead of makin' our own."

Bobby agreed and headed home to his dinner. As Sonny stood on the front porch of the house taking off his wet poncho and galoshes, he saw Mrs. Loganson's three plump, white ducks come waddling down the road. They paused at the corner, and softly quacking, paddled serenely across the Store yard.

HALLOWEEN

At the end of October in Graham there sometimes comes a string of nights that make you remember the summer just ended. The moon rises enormous and yellow, the last of the fall leaves slowly drift down and owls hoot in the woods and hollows round about. On a night just like this, Sonny did his first trick-or-treating.

Mama Clark had told him some time ago that he could go around with the older kids that year, but somehow he'd forgotten all about it until one morning Tony asked him, "Sonny, what are you gonna be tonite?"

"Huh? 'Gonna be'? ' Whadder ya talkin' about, Tony?"

Tony laughed. "Sonny, ain't you never been tricker treetin'?" Sonny shook his head. "Well, today is HAL-LOW-EEEN. Tonight's when all the witches, 'n spooks, 'n haints walks the earth, 'n you have to dress up like one of 'em so you can pass amongst 'em quiet-like, 'n you go to all everybody's house 'n say "TRICKER TREET!" 'n they act scared of you and give you candy, 'n bubble gum, 'n popcorn balls, 'n such."

Sonny's eyes had grown rounder and rounder during Tony's recitation. Goblins...Haints...Witches...CANDY! Tonight WAS Halloween. How in the world had he forgottten? He knew he was caught unprepared, though. "How do you dress up, Tony? Whadder you gonna be?"

"I aim to be The Mummy. Mama's gonna wrap me in strips she tore offn a ole' sheet. Bill's gonna be the Headless Horseman. Mama read us about him the other day. He's usin' one of daddy's ole' raincoats and buttonin' it over his head and cuttin' two eye holes in the front of it so's he can see out. He got one of them candle-punkins they had down at Fussels Five and Dime to carry around like it was his head."

"WOW! I ain't never seen no headless horseman. I ain't never seen no horseman. What's a horseman?" Sonny wondered.

Tony laughed. "You'll see tonight. I got to git home and git my chores done. I 'll meet you right here after supper, and we'll go tricker treetin' together."

Sonny ran up the sidewalk into the house fast as he could. "Mama Kent! Mama Kent! You got to help me. What am I gonna go as? Tonite's HALLOWEEN!" She gave a gummy grin.

"I'd plum forgot! Well, let me think . . ." she stood still and then gave a nod. "I believe I got what you need, Sonny. Come on." She led him into the back bedroom where she took an old, thin sheet from the cedar chest. She draped it over his head and cut the trailing edges to fit his height. "Now, Sonny, you got to make a decision. Do you want me to just cut eye holes in that sheet and make you a haint? Or do you want to have yore whole head through the sheet and wear this mask and be a goblin?" She whipped the sheet off his head and he saw the mask in her hand. It was of a horribly ugly old man, with snurly lips, warty nose, and bright orange-fuzz hair. It was made of that flimsy-hard plastic stuff and had an elastic band that fit around your head to hold it on.

Sonny looked at it. He didn't know about Headless Horsemen but they couldn't be much scarier than this! "I'll take the Goblin!"

Sonny was dressed, paper sack in hand, waiting on the front porch for Tony. As the moon rose over the stubbled corn field across the road, Sonny watched it and shivered as it cast weird shadows across the

landscape. There was definitely something mysterious about that moon. Witches would swoop gleefully in the light of that moon. Out of the corners of his eyes he saw movement. He snapped his head around! . . . nothing. Something rustled in the maple tree . . . he heard the porch creak behind him . . . he felt breath on his neck . . . YIKES! He leaped up and spun in mid-air, landing flat-footed on the sidewalk facing the house. Nothing. No one there.

"Hey Sonny!" Tony spoke behind him.

"YOWWWWW!" Sonny bellowed like a lost calf and leapt the steps. He hit the porch running and the screen door didn't hit his butt as he entered the safety of the lighted living room. He ran full tilt into Mama Kent's apron.

"Here! Sonny! What is it?"

Before he could catch his breath enough to tell her about the devil in the front yard, he heard a loud ha-ha-ha-ing coming from the porch. He let go of Mama Kent's skirts and turned around. There was Tony standing at the screen door. Sonny could see where tears of laughter had cut two tan streaks in the thick, white dusting powder his Mama had put on his face. Well, Sonny could see the humor in the situation now that he knew he wasn't being accosted by a demon from Hell.

"Come on, Sonny. Let's us go. Bill's gonna meet us up at the Peters'. They're havin' a party-like with apple-dunkin', 'n RC's, 'n Moon Pies. Everybody's goin' there first."

Sonny ran out on the porch and spied his trick-or-treat bag in the yard. "Bye, Mama Kent." He jumped off the top step and he and Tony ran off down the road to the Peters'.

A crowd had gathered by the time they arrived. Beside Donny and Bobby, the Loganson kids were there. Their parents sat with Mr. and Mrs. Peters at the kitchen table, watching the kids through the doorway. Mr. Watkins Turner (Mrs. Peters' dad) who was at least a couple hundred years old, sat in his chair in the corner of the living room. He was old, but not senile. He was taking it all in, but not saying much.

Tony and Sonny came in to a chorus of "Howdys." Mrs. Peters came from the kitchen with a cold RC and Moon Pie for each of them, and they sat down in the floor near Mr. Turner. Sonny nibbled and sipped, looking at everybody's get-up.

Jimmy looked like a vampire. Jerry was a werewolf. Kathleen was a purely ugly witch. She had cut and tied a swath of sea-grass twine into a coarse wig for her head. She looked like she had got her head caught in a hay-baling machine. Jacky was wearing his Momma's red chenille bathrobe over his overalls and his feet were encased in bright red galoshes. Sonny couldn't figure out what he was supposed to be, but it was pretty scary.

Tony had wandered over to the front porch to join the group bobbing for apples in the big aluminum tub set there for that purpose. Sonny had just finished his snack and slipped his mask back into place when he heard a muted voice in his ear. "Hey, Sonny. Ya wanna see muh punkin?"

He looked up to see a dark green raincoat lift a flickering pumpkin with a hideous grin toward his face. The Headless Horseman! Before Sonny could find his voice to greet Bill, a puff of breeze, or maybe a haint, slid through the room. It flicked the pumpkin's candle flame higher while whisking a strand of orange hair toward it. POOF! Just like that, Sonny was on fire. The rayon strands of hair ignited instantly, and in seconds his head was girdled by a blazing halo!

Sonny grabbed the chin of the mask and pulled forward frantically. It lifted away from his face, but snapped right back when he tried to throw it away. Pull, snap! Pull, snap! Sonny was a picture of desperation with blistered ears when, finally, the damn elastic band broke and the flaming missile shot across the room.

Those few seconds wreaked havoc in that country house. Bill started hollering "FAR! FAR!" The apple dunkers were crowding in the front door, "What is it? What's the matter?" The adults came running in from the kitchen "Lordamercy, children! Are ya'll alright?" Sonny was cupping his red ears with both hands, crying. Mr. Turner was cussing and jabbing with his cane at the mask smoldering in the corner.

As the women clustered around the squalling Sonny, Jacky stumped over and calmly stomped on the mask with his enormous galoshes.

"Hit like to set this place afar!" Mr. Turner shouted. "Hit come at me like far and brimstone from Hell!" He was really worked up. Mrs. Petty delivered the white liniment to those doctoring poor Sonny's ears, then ran to get her daddy calmed down and into bed.

Jacky looked down at the mashed mask lying on the scorched linoleum. "I'm glad I wore these here shoes," he said to no one in particular.

The Store was buzzing on November first. All of Graham had heard about Sonny's brush with the devil. Sonny stayed in the house, sitting in Mama Kent's old rocker by the window. His ears were standing out with big water blisters and he didn't feel so good. He dipped occasionally into the bag of treats Mama Kent had given him and watched the fading leaves skip across the yard.

SNOW

Low, thick-necked clouds had started gathering in a pewter halo late in the chill afternoon. Sonny was driving in a big cardboard box on the back porch and the heavy traffic held his attention and kept him from noticing the change in the slant of light. Mama Kent came out of the kitchen and stood at the porch edge, wiping her red hands on a checkered dish towel. She craned forward and looked up at the grey circle of clouds building up. She tilted her head and took several quick sniffs of air. "Snow's comin," Sonny, I can smell it."

Sonny threw on the brakes and jumped over the convertible door before it had stopped rolling. "What? What does it smell like, Mama Kent?"

"Why it smells like the bottom of the metal dipper as you gulp the last of the spring water out . . . kinda frosty and tinny. And lookee here, Sonny. Look at them drops hangin' on the ends of the vibernie-- see? Havin' drops hang like that is a sure sign of snow. My own granny told me that, and I reckon it is so."

Now, Sonny could plainly see the perfect drops of moisture hanging on the viburnum hedge. He took several sniffs of air. Yeah, he could smell it a bit. It was like the inside of the red metal chest where Papa Kent kept the cold drinks over at the Store. Mama Kent turned to go back to her cooking. "I believe we'll have some on the ground by mornin'."

Sonny climbed back into his car, but didn't start the motor. He was excited and disturbed by the weather report. He knew he had seen

snow and even played in it up in Detroit. His mama said he had and she even had a picture of him standing beside a snowman. But try as hard as he could, he couldn't remember a thing about it. Of course he knew what snow was--big, flat, white frozen water. He knew there were several possibilities for adventure involving it. But knowing something and remembering something are two different things. Sonny decided he'd had enough driving for one day, so he left the convertible sitting there on the porch and raced down the shallow back step into the field behind the Store. There he stood, looking up and around at the clouds. He turned, turned, turned, turned . . . till he fell, dizzy and giggling, to the ground. He lay watching the pewter sky lurch round and round. Then he squeezed his eyes shut, and crossing both fingers he whispered, "Please God . . . make it snow!"

Sonny woke earlier than usual the next morning. He lay quiet, listening for sounds of Mama Kent in the kitchen. Nothing. As he was hopping out of bed he suddenly paused and stared around his room. Here in the back bedroom the only window was high in the wall and faced east. It let in enough sunlight to wake him up on fair days, but today there was something different about the light. It was more than bright, more than shining--it glistened!

He stomped into his jeans and boots, grabbed his coat off the bed post, and ran through the kitchen onto the back porch where he stopped, thunderstruck. SNOW!! Every surface was smothered and mounded, molded and rounded by an exquisite sparkling blanket of snow. It was heaped on the well-house roof, weighed down the dark cedars in the fence row. It

covered the yard, fields, and road right down to the trestle in perfect white. The bare maple branches held their frosting on one side only, but the viburnum hedge was flocked in thick clusters.

Sonny just stood there, mouth open, eyes squinting from the glory of it all. He stood on the porch edge and the snow was only three inches below his toe tips. He could see that nobody had been about yet. Too early. No car or horse or dog or man had set foot in the snow yet. He'd be the first to stride out and conquer Graham. In the name of Old Man Winter, I claim you!

He crouches to make his leap--but something holds him back. He stops, straightens. He turns his head slowly from side to side, looking, looking, aching at the place where his ears meet his head. Suddenly he knows he's seeing something--seeing a mystery. The snow has come. It has not only covered the world, it has transformed it. Who knows what treasure lies underneath the large lump near the cistern? What secret Watcher might be grinning with frosty teeth within the fuzzy white viburnum? Somehow, as young as he is, Sonny knows he's seeing something he may never see again. He can't express it, will spend years trying to find the words to articulate his glimpse behind the veil.

He steps off the porch, but lightly, reverently. He slowly walks down the sloping yard onto the road and up to the fluffy white railroad tracks. As he blazes his trail, he lifts each foot high and sets it down squarely. No sloppy foot-dragging on this path! He marches down to the trestle while in his heart one thought echos joyfully over and over, "Thank You, God!"

Later that afternoon, Bill and Tony came by and hollered for Sonny to come and go sliding out back. Sonny came running out, jamming his hat on his head. He stopped short, looking all around for any sign of a sled. Nothing. "Where's your sled, Tony?" he asked, bewildered. "How we gonna slide without a sled?"

"We got this cardboard, Sonny. It's a whole lot fastern' any old sled." Tony held up a large flat piece of cardboard that must have been cut from a big appliance box. Bill was holding one and Tony had two pieces, one for him and one for Sonny.

"Let's go!" The boys floundered through the snow drifted in the road till they stood on the bank at the edge of the field where Mr. Burnett raised corn every other year. Now the coarse corn stubble was smoothed over by a pristine blanket of snow. The field sloped gently for about fifty yards, ending in a three foot bank that dropped sharply to Mill Creek. The boys stood drinking in the brilliance of the scene for a few minutes. They almost hated to mess it up . . . but not quite.

With a whoop, Bill jumped off the verge holding his cardboard to his chest. He flung himself on it with a belly flop and the momentum of his weight sent him skidding and sliding down the field, picking up speed, jouncing over the uneven patches, and finally ending up in the tangle of snow-covered honeysuckle vines that grew over the creek bank at the field verge. After satisfying themselves that they wouldn't end up in that freezing creek, Tony and Sonny took off and aped Bill's trip in fine style.

The three boys slid and hiked back about a million times that afternoon till Mama Kent called them up to the house. They took off

their wet things and spread them on straight-backed chairs pulled up close to the wood stove. As the coats, mittens, and mufflers steamed and dried, the boys slurped hot cocoa and ate fresh vanilla tea cakes she had baked that morning.

Sonny led the troop back to his room to play with the new checker set his mama had sent him.

When Mama Kent stuck her head in the door a while later, after noticing an unnatural lack of noise, she saw all three boys sprawled on Sonny's bed fast asleep.

WASH DAY

One Saturday morning in early spring, Sonny got up and strolled down the railroad to the spout spring and swimming hole under the trestle. He picked up a handful of smooth creek stones and stood plunking them into the rain-swollen creek. A large brown sycamore leaf came swirling by on the current, and watching it twist and dip reminded Sonny of wash days when he was just a kid (a year or two ago).

Mama Kent, Mrs. Peters, Mrs. Cantrel, and Mrs. Loganson would gather all their washing up and Papa Kent would roll it down to the creek bank in the wheelbarrow. There he would start a fire under the two huge iron kettles suspended on tripods that always stood there. The women trooped down to the creek carrying large wooden tubs by their rope handles and with apron pockets bulging with lumps of lye soap.

When all were assembled, the ladies started the laborious task of washing on a scrub board all the clothes dirtied in a week by large families. The linens were first: dipped in the creek, smeared with soap, and scrubbed vigorously on a corrugated wash board. Then they were dipped and rinsed in the creek and put into the big kettles to boil. Large wooden paddles resembling oars were used to stir the clothes and to lift them steaming and gleaming from the water. They were laid on a clean sheet on the grassy creek bank until they were cool enough to wring. Then two women would each grab an end and twist in opposite directions until all excess water was wrung out. The clean clothes were then put into pillowcases to be carried back and hung in the backyard.

The youngest children always came down to play in the creek where their mamas could keep an eye on them. It was always fun to play with the other kids, but Sonny's favorite wash day pastime was when Mama Kent would tuck up her skirts, revealing skinny calves, and plop Sonny into a large wooden tub and pull him along in the water. Back and forth she would wade in her old sneakers, gliding, swirling, skimming that old tub through the water. It was while Sonny sat there, feeling an impression of the cold creek water seep through to chill his butt, that he figured out that he liked boats . . . liked them a lot.

While she whooshed him back and forth she pointed out large quivering patches of purple-blue and yellow-black butterflies gathered at certain spots on the creek bank. "See them butterflies, Sonny? They're sucking salt outta the mud."

"How do they know the salt is there?"

"They smell it, I reckon. They need a little salt to get that sweet nectar taste outta their mouths."

Sonny nodded, he knew the feeling. He always saved back a last bite of cornbread and onion to cut the sweet taste of pie off his tongue.

As he stood there this morning, the air was full of butterflies that lit and fluttered over the muddy creek bank. At least some things didn't change. Mama Kent had a new electric washtub now with a fine automatic wringer, just like all the other neighbor ladies. The weekly wash day tradition had died out.

Sonny sighed. He picked up a handful of rocks and skipped them

across the water as he slowly walked along the creek bank. He was wondering what Bill and Tony were up to when he noticed a fat redbird sitting on a low elm branch. He stopped, and moving very slowly, took a rock out of his pocket and threw it in a swift overhand at the unsuspecting bird. Bing! The rock hit the bull's-eye and the bird tumbled backwards off the branch to lay motionless in the grass.

His first thought was "Oh, No! I've kilt it!" Then, "Alright! I've hit it! I'm a hunter!" Breathing hard, he slowly approached the fallen bird. He picked it up; it was so light! He gently gripped its little body, turning it from side to side while its red head wobbled against his thumb. Sonny held the bird close to his face, saw the blue tinge of the papery eyelids. He was feeling a strange mixture of regret and elation. He desperately wanted to hurry up and be big enough to go hunting with his grandpa and uncles, and this kill would prove he was developing a good aim. Yet as he looked at the black pinfeathers around the bird's eyes, and tapped the yellow beak with his thumbnail, he knew he'd put an end to a beautiful thing, knew he'd taken something he couldn't return.

He blew a warm breath at the wiggly head and gave the bird a little shake. Suddenly, its black eye popped open, and before Sonny could react, it turned and clamped its beak on the little bit of skin between Sonny's thumb and forefinger. The feathered body squirmed, and with all its might, it pinched the devil out of enemy flesh.

"YOWWWWWW!!!" Sonny screeched, and flung his arm out full-length and frantically shook his hand. The jerky motion dislodged the bird, which gave a shrill whistle and shot off into the wild blue yonder!

Sonny stood there, dumbfounded, looking from the pointy indentation in his flesh to the redbird now high in the elm tree and scolding him like thunder.

Later that day, he told Bill and Tony about the miraculous shot he'd made. "Knocked him clean offn' the limb. BAM! He never knowed what hit him!" he bragged.

Tony snickered. "Naw. But you sure knowed what bit the shit outta you, though, didn' ya?"

"How did you know about that?" Sonny demanded loudly over the laughter of the other two.

"Yore grandaddy tolt my Pa, that's how." Tony said.

Sonny stood there watching his two friends guffaw at his expense. He finally just gave up and joined in the joke. It was no use trying to be uppity. They all knew each other too well.

GARDENING TIME

In the early March days, Sonny was nervous as a cat. The weather blew hot, then cold. Snow could flurry in the morning, and by dinner time it could be fifty degrees. It rained often yet, unpredictably, and it was a cold rain, too. Sonny would kick around the yard till the picky little March wind would send him indoors, jumpy and bothered. There, he'd pace from room to room till Mama Kent would suggest he go next door and visit the Store.

So over he'd go, but he wouldn't stay long. Papa Kent would send him packing. "Git on back over to home, Sonny. Yore makin' me lose this checker game." Papa Kent knew how to deal with March . . . he just played checkers with whoever was hanging around the Store eating cheese and crackers.

One day Mama Kent was racking her brain trying to think of something to occupy this child. She knew just the thing. She went to the back of the kitchen pantry and gathered up the seeds and sets, bulbs and tubers, she had saved from last year's garden. She spread an old flour sack on the kitchen table and spread the garden out on it. "Hey, Sonny, come on in here." He came running from the back bedroom. "Let's you and me start plannin' out our garden. I aim to let you have your own little corner to grow in this year."

"You mean I can plant whatever I want?"

"Whatever you want." It sounded like a solemn promise.

"Hot dog! I want me some carrots and radishes and I want some green onions and lettuce and I want some"

"Whoa!" she laughed. "I reckon you could have yore own salat patch. Let me git a piece of paper and we'll draw us up a picture of where we want everything to be."

When they were gathered at the supper table, they told Papa Kent their plan.

"Well, I reckon it is about time to talk to Ned . . . see when he can come turn the garden fer us."

Ned Cash was a bachelor man, born and bred in Nunnelly and never even thinking of leaving it. He was in his middle sixties and, unfortunately, was afflicted with a slight palsy in his hands. This didn't stop him from being the local barber, however. After he'd run the shears shakily over your head a few times and jerkily shaved your neck, he'd give a chuckle-snort and say, "Wall, I guess if 'n you go hide in the woods for a coupla weeks, hit'll look all right!" Then he'd just guffaw. He never got tired of this joke.

Keeping the neighborhood groomed wasn't Ned's only function. He was the guardian of a big roan Mammoth Jackass, Little Red, who was broke to the plow very nicely. Regrettably, Little Red was born with one of his hind legs slightly shorter than the other, so he walked with a noticeable limp and a loud jingling of harness. He pulled a wooden sled on which sat the plow and disk Ned used to work up the soil of his neighbors' gardens. The heavy wooden runners of the sled left furrows in the chert road, so you could follow Ned-and-Red sign all through the community during the early spring.

Ned would ride standing in the back of the sled holding the long lead reins in his hands, shouting encouragement to Little Red. "Hep!

Giddie ep, Red! Yore pullin' fine, you gimpy Jack! Yahoo!!" Sonny heard them coming up the road a few afternoons after the supper conversation. He ran to tell the folks about it, then raced down the back yard and on down Mill Creek Road to meet them. Ned would usually let him take the reins and drive a-ways.

The spring and early summer were wet and mild. The garden was growing well. Sonny's salad patch was well sprouted and he scrutinized every plant there while watching Mama Kent weeding the corn rows. He was down on all fours, looking at his lettuce, when he heard a wild shout.

"Lordy! Lordy! Snake! Snake! SNAKEKKK!"

He looked up to see Mama Kent hopping from one foot to another, rapidly raising and lowering the rake she'd been weeding with. She was whupping the devil out of a spread-adder she'd found in the corn. She attacked him with her tongue, too.

"You git yoreself outta here! I ain't ahavin' you in here! This here is MY garden! I'm agonna stomp you to dust!"

Sonny watched it all open-mouthed from his vantage point. He saw the tattered snake become entangled in the tines of the rake. He saw her hold the rake suspended in the air above her head as she bewilderedly looked around for her vanished enemy.

"Where did you go? Where did that snake go?" She turned left and right, craning her neck around, surveying the corn rows. Her body movements caused the snake-pennant to flutter in the metal teeth, and she caught sight of it out of the corner of her eye.

"HEEEEEEEEEEE!" she was heard all the way to Nunnelly. "There ye are! OH! OH! OH!" Each exclamation was accompanied by a stout blow to the ground for the tattered snake, which had been dead for a full three minutes.

Mama Kent had to stop to catch her breath, and she realized she had won the fight. As the blood-lust left her eye, she started looking around for Sonny. He was doubled-up in his salad patch, holdin' his stomach, laughin' fit to be tied.

SCHOOL DAYS

Sonny spent his first five years living like a natural man. He splashed the creek, ran the trails, stomped up and down the packed chert road, and spent his days in the woods. His grandparents pretty much let him run wild and do whatever took his fancy. Mama Kent had been heard to say, "Sonny is a good boy . . . if you let him have his way." They didn't talk to him about school much or try to tutor him in what lay ahead when he reached his sixth birthday. Consequently, Sonny faced his first day of school completely unprepared.

Mama Kent got him up early and washed his face and ears (unusual) and helped him into a clean cotton shirt and new jeans. He knew he was starting school today but he didn't rightly know what "startin' school" meant.

"Mrs. Cantrel's gonna stop and give you a ride to school, Sonny. Tony's startin' today and Bill said he'd show you boys around."

She worked at the kitchen counter while Sonny ate bacon and eggs, gravy and biscuits. She peered out of the window and said, "Sonny, you hurry! Here comes Doy now!"

Sonny gulped the last of his milk and wiped his mustache off with the back of his hand. Mama Kent kissed his cheek and handed him a small paper sack. "This here's yore dinner, Sonny. A couple a biscuits with fried tater, a chicken leg from last night, and one of them bananers James brought down on Saturday."

Sonny hugged his granny, grabbed his lunch, and ran out the back door. He climbed into the back seat of the Cantrels' old Ford and

settled beside Tony who looked unusually clean. The two boys chattered happily all the way from Graham over to the Pinewood School on Highway 48.

The Pinewood School went first through tenth grades and served all the little rural communities round about. It had a total population of eighty-five or so, including the teachers, the two cooks, and the janitor. It was a plain little two-story brick building with a half-moon gravel lot in front and a band of maple and oak trees surrounding it on both sides and in back. Mr. Salsey had a big hay field that joined the school property, though there was a pasture fence setting it off. One spring he planted the field heavily with red clover and when it began to bloom in late April, it covered the rolling field with an undulating blanket of crimson glory. The kids lined up along the fence at recess and stood there, watching that living sea of red and green bend, ripple, wave, and dip in the breeze. They knew they could play kick-the-can any old time. This was a sight they knew they might never see again.

It so happened that Tony and Sonny were assigned to the same homeroom teacher on their first day of school. Her name was Mrs. Setton and she was the only first grade teacher at Pinewood. She was a tiny, dried-apple of a woman, a Christian with a halo of snowy white hair floating around her head. She was a kind and gentle person perfectly suited to her job. She never had to spank anyone. Just to have her look at you sadly and chide you softly in a melancholy tone was enough to make the average first-grader feel about two inches tall. On this

day, she told everybody to choose a desk. Tony and Sonny got the last two seats in the row by the window.

"Good Morning, children. I welcome each and every one of you! This year we're gonna have so much fun and learn so much you just won't hardly believe it! The first thing I've got to do is say each person's name to see if you are written on this list." She held up a white piece of paper. "I will read off this list and call the roll. When you hear your name say 'Here' and raise your hand." She smiled at the innocent, freckled faces turned toward her. She quickly went down the list, the children answering and flapping their hands in response.

When she'd finished, she said, "Now is there anybody here whose name I didn't call?" Sonny raised his hand.

"What's your name?"

"Sonny." The class giggled, and Mrs. Setton hid a smile.

"What's your last name, hon?"

Sonny looked at her blankly. Sonny was the only thing he'd ever been called. Tony leaned forward. "Hit's Kent!" he hissed.

"Kk . . . Kent," Sonny stammered.

She scanned her list. "I don't see a Kent here. I'll tell you what. I will say these names I don't have a check by and you tell me when you recognize one, OK? Lewis Nathan Batey? . . . no . . . Benjamin Lee Hobson? no . . . Edwin Philip Simmons?"

Sonny thought. "Well, I guess that's it. I do have a Uncle Philip."

Mrs. Setton nodded. "Well, I'll find out at the dinner break. We'll just call you Sonny, OK?"

He nodded and grinned.

"Now class, let's see what you already know. I'd like the first row to come to the board." She indicated the row where Tony and Sonny sat. "I want each of you to write as many of your numbers and letters as you can. We'll see if anyone knows the whole alphabet."

The five kids in the first row marched up to the board and took their places along it. Sonny followed their example and picked up a long piece of yellow chalk. He stared as the girl next to him started making squiggles on the board.

"Wuddar we doin'?" Sonny asked Tony in a low and desperate tone.

"We're writin', Sonny. Numbers and letters. You know, countin' 1,2,3,4,5 . . . A,B,C,D,E . . . you know."

Sonny didn't know. He knew about the theory of reading and writing and counting, of course, but nobody had ever shown him the written symbols used to do all that. He used his chalk to imitate that girl's squiggles as best he could. Then he thankfully returned to his desk while the next row took their turn. Wheew! He sure hoped school got easier or he got smarter in a hurry. If things kept up this pace, he'd be dead by dinner!

Sonny soon got the hang of the school thing. He was reciting his ABC's in no time and he really liked numbers. Though he may not have always had his homework, he always wore a real sorry expression when he was caught without it. He spoke nice to his teachers, called them "ma'am," and he was always able to make his classmates laugh.

Pinewood was a fine place for a wild country boy in those days. All the students knew each other; the teachers were like your own kin. Mr. Hefton, the janitor, would show you the scar on his forearm he got while stopping a German bullet, and would occasionally join in a game of baseball at recess. But the best thing about Pinewood School was Mrs. Darce Weaver and Mrs. Fronie Adams, the cooks.

These women could stir up a good meal, and they served it with a grin. The cafeteria was in the cellar of the school, It was a cellar, not a basement. Though it had a smooth concrete floor, the walls were earthen. Two long wooden tables stretched the length of the room with benches on both sides of them. Lighting was provided by bare bulbs hanging over each table, dimly reflecting off the plastic tablecloths. It sounds bleak in this description, but in reality, it was wonderful. When the children were packed cheek-by-jowl on the benches and the good smell of country cooking hung around them, and their happy babble bounced off the chert clay walls and mixed with the clink of their forks on their plates, believe this . . . it was wonderful.

Monday it might be meatloaf, mashed potatoes, onion and cornbread. Tuesday perhaps it was white beans, turnip greens, porkchops and cornbread. Every couple of weeks they had butter and Karo syrup and homemade biscuits. And every Friday it was this-week's-leftovers soup day. The sweet little cooks encouraged them to eat their fill, seconds were permitted. Nobody left the table hungry. For the rest of his life, Sonny would smell those school dinners every time he descended the stairs and entered someone's basement.

Sonny soon learned that the best parts of the school day were the two recesses. About ten in the morning and again in the afternoon the kids would bust out the door like wild things and make a stampede for the playground. The girls would cluster up at the swings and the see-saw. The boys would hang around the monkey bars a few minutes, then drift down toward the woods behind the school where the older boys all congregated. There, a cigarette would be passed around the circle while the talk ranged from girls to when school would ever be out to who had the loudest barking hound dog.

There was a curious connection in this gathering. Impulses seemed to pass from individuals through the group like ripples through thumped jello. If one yawned, all yawned. If one burped, soon all would be belching. If one expressed a need to take a pee, well, soon they'd all be pissing in a row.

On one such occasion, a lively discussion arose on who could make the highest stream. Several boys declared their supremacy in this area, and immediately the whole line altered the angle of their plumbing and amber arches of pee rose into the air. They stood there like some demented chorus line, leaning back and aiming high. The contest ended when Benji Harrison gave a sputtering holler and broke ranks. Amid shouts of laughter, the boys unanimously voted him the winner. He'd pissed right in his own face.

Of all the teachers at Pinewood, Sonny loved Mrs. Bly best. She taught third and fourth grades and was a widow-woman who looked just like Aunt Bea from Mayberry would when TV came along. She was a soft-

spoken, gentle woman, but she could talk straight when she had to. She never made fun of a person if he got his long division problems wrong on the board, and she was always willing to give extra help after school. She had a way of looking straight at you and making you believe she could be trusted. Before you knew it, you would be telling her stuff going on in your life, at home and all. She was a friend.

Sonny always tried to be extra good in her class, often volunteering to wash the blackboard and beat the chalk dust out of the erasers. He wasn't exactly the teacher's pet, but he knew Mrs. Bly liked him as much as he liked her. One stormy afternoon in late April, she proved it.

On wet days like that one, the recess had to be spent indoors. The older grades, sixth through tenth, would go to the gym for basketball or volleyball. The little kids would stay in their home rooms where the teachers would be in charge of coming up with something to keep them occupied. Sometimes they would play "Simon Sez"; sometimes they did the "Hokey Pokey." Mrs. Bly would sometimes pick a volunteer to lead the class in exercises, or she might lead them in singing songs. She sang well and the class loved to join her.

On this particular day, she said, "Since we can't go outside today, let's play The Mystery Chalk Game." She lowered her voice as she said the game's title, and a murmur of excitement went around the room. Nobody had ever heard of this game before.

"Ya'll move your chairs into a line up front here and push your desks back a little." The children jumped up to obey. While they were

arranging the seats, Mrs. Bly got a quarter piece of yellow chalk out of her desk drawer.

"Now the way you play this game is this: I will pick a person to go stand in the cloak-room. Then I will give the chalk to the person on the end of the row, and ya'll will pass it from hand to hand while I count to fifty. When I'm finished with the count, whoever has the chalk will keep it clutched tight and everybody will hold his fists in his lap. The guesser will come out from the cloak-room, walk up and down the line looking at everybody's face, and then try to pick the person who is really holding the chalk." The children squirmed with excitement and nudged each other, grinning.

"Now, the object is for ya'll to try to trick the guesser into thinking you have the chalk, but you can't say anything to him." She looked up and down the row. "Who wants to be the guesser?" A dozen arms shot up and kids wagged their hands frantically. She looked slowly at each face, prolonging the suspense, enjoying their excitement. "Sonny, you be the guesser today. Come on back here with me."

Sonny could hear his friends' excited chatter as he strutted beside Mrs. Bly to the back of the room. When they got into the cloak-room he said anxiously, "How am I gonna do this, Mrs. Bly? How in the world can I guess who's got that chalk? I know Tony and Arthur's gonna be trying to trick me like crazy, 'n everybody else, too."

"Well, Sonny, you and I will be the one's doing the tricking." She grinned so big all her dimples showed. "When you get back out there, I want you to put on a good show. Walk real slow along the line. Look everybody up and down. Look hard in their faces and don't smile

if you can help it. Act like you're taking it all real seriously, but as you move along, keep watching me out of the corner of your eye. I'll set my chair over by the door where you can see me from anywhere along the line. When you get in front of the person who is holding the chalk, I'll cross one foot over the other! Don't you let on to anybody how we're doing this, now Sonny. Not even after the game is over. Let's fool 'em good, what do you say?" She stuck out her hand for a shake.

"You bet!" Sonny said grinning, and he pumped her hand up and down.

He sat down on the floor as she walked back to join his classmates. He heard the scrape of her chair as she dragged it over next to the door, and then he heard her start counting. She counted kind of slow, like you do when you're playing hide-and-seek. When she reached fifty, she called him, and he strode out, dusting off his britches' seat.

He forced his face into stern, impassive lines so that when he finally faced them, he looked like the Solemn Ole Judge. He clasped his hands behind his back and walked to the end of the line, where he had a good view of Mrs. Bly sitting by the door. He started his trip, scrutinizing every person, wrinkling his brow, and peering into each face like he was looking for a criminal.

One by one he searched them, somehow managing to keep a straight face even when Tony crossed his eyes at him and Arthur Stevenson wiggled his ears in that famous way he had. When he was about three quarters through the line, he stepped in front of Polly McKalb. Truth to tell, he was a little sweet on Polly, and he felt his face begin to redden.

He could have liked her a lot, except she was so snotty. Just yesterday she'd laughed real loud at him when Mrs. Bly had asked him what his favorite condiment was and he'd said, "Texas." He thought she'd said "continent," for heaven's sake!

Anyway, as he stopped before Polly he caught a slight movement in his peripheral vision. Mrs. Bly's right ankle was now resting on her left! He almost whooped, but managed to turn it into a cough; then he leaned his face in close to Polly's and looked straight into her blue eyes. She leaned back slightly (boys were so smelly!), but otherwise she held her ground. She kept her hands tightly clasped in her lap just like everyone else, and matched him eyeball for eyeball.

The whole line was holding its breath, and even Mrs. Bly was leaning forward a little - signs Sonny wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't been in on the secret. He straightened up and glanced down at Polly's red tennis shoes. Then he turned to go on the next person.

A faintly audible sigh had hardly been released by the line when he spun on his heel and pointed at Polly. "She's got it!" he announced in a voice like thunder, making her jump and squeak. There was a moment of dumbstruck silence, then bedlam broke out! Polly jumped up, round-eyed, and opened her right hand. There was the yellow chalk in her dusty palm.

"She tolt him! She give him the wink!" Tony protested loudly.

"I did not! I never! Did I Mrs. Bly?" Mrs. Bly shook her head.

"Well how did he know? How? You just tell me that." Arthur was bamboozled. Sonny had been one of his best friends for years and he'd never shown any sign of clairvoyance before.

The air buzzed with proffered explanations, the boys accusing the girls and the girls denying all responsibility. "He musta seen it through her fingers."

"He did not, her hands was clenched tight."

"He musta heard her scratching a fingernail on it."

"Well, he does have ears like big fried pies stuck on his head, but I wasn't moving my fingers," said Polly.

"I ain't never seen the like! I don't know how he done it."

The conjecture raged on as the children moved their chairs and desks back into normal position. For the rest of the week much discussion of Sonny's triumph brought nobody closer to the answer. No matter how they begged, Sonny was mum on the mystery of the Chalk Game. And for the rest of their lives, whenever Sonny's eye met Mrs. Bly's, they shared a secret smile.

Late one spring afternoon, a twelve-year-old Sonny took off up Mill Creek road on his old wobbly Shwinn Flyer. He was headed up to Old Man Rochelle's place, way up the creek, to pick up the hound dog puppy he'd been promised. Sonny had worked rowing a field of Mr. Rochelle's corn that summer and part of the agreed upon payment was to be pick of the litter the next time his Walker bitch whelped. Sonny got part of the payment in cash, which he used to buy a long, long, LONG pair of two-toned loafers, black and white, which he further enhanced by having heel taps put on in Totty's Shoe Repair. But that's another story.

Sonny was excited about this puppy because Mr. Rochelle's bitch was famous in these parts for her coonhunting abilities, and any puppy of hers was bound to be smart. Sonny had been aiming for quite a spell to get him a good houndog. He felt he was ready to join his uncles on their occasional coon hunts.

He arrived at the Rochelle place and the old man led him out to the corn crib. Sonny could hear the puppies yapping and flapping in there and he stepped over the high threshold into a puddle-cluster of white pups spotted with large splotches of black and brown. He squatted down and was swarmed by puppy bodies, squirming, leaping, licking and biting him wherever they could. He laughed and tickled their bellies, holding up first one, then another, checking their feet and legs, comparing tail and ear length, and delighting in their bright eyes and puppy breath. Finally, he settled on a sturdy little male with extra long ears, a big brown spot on his rump, and feet as big as silver dollars.

"I'll take this 'un, Mr. Rochelle. He's gonna be a big fine 'un."

Old Man Rochelle nodded and grinned. "Yeah. He'll be a brawny tree dog, all right. You start training him early, Sonny, and you'll have you a good trailer."

Sonny thanked him and picked up his dog, heading back to his bike. He pedaled home fast because twilight was settling down to dark and his bike didn't have a headlight anymore. In fact, it was in the bent up, hollow, aluminum headlight fixture that Sonny's pup rode home.

"I'll feed you some left over biscuits and eggs when I get you home. What am I gonna name you?" Sonny pedaled and thought about it. He didn't want some stupid name that made no sense like "Blue" or "Beau." He wanted a real good calling name. A name that wouldn't embarrass a dog. He finally decided on George, after Mr. George Hefton, the janitor at Pinewood School. "How does that sound, George?" The hound pup rolled his eyes up at Sonny and showed the whites. He didn't much care. He was still thinking about the promised eggs and biscuits.

Sonny got home and ran in to show off his pup to his folks. "I'm callin' him George, like Mr. Hefton. He's gonna be a real fine coon hunter. I just know it." Sonny looked down at the pup busily eating a plate of table scraps. "Yeah. I got a real good feelin' about this 'un."

George grew like a weed on his diet of good country cooking, and he soon was a skinny, big-footed, long-eared tub of amiability. He had a deep, bass, hound-dog voice that could rattle the windows, but he didn't use it much. Life on and under the Store porch at Graham didn't call

for much bellowing. His boy, Sonny, kept him busy and satisfied.

For instance, his boy had this red sock cap with a big, fuzzy ball on top. George hated that ball. When Sonny got off the school bus at the Store of an afternoon, George would be lying in wait for that ball. He'd charge his boy and hit him broadside, rolling him off his feet. Once he had him down, laughing and helpless, he'd jump on his back and go for that durn ball. He'd take the whole top of Sonny's head in his mouth, growling like thunder. Boy and dog would roll and wrestle till the whole cap would come off in George's mouth, then he would shake the daylights out of it until Sonny grabbed it away and stuck it in his pocket. Neither participant ever tired of this game.

George became such a large part of Sonny's life that soon he couldn't imagine ever being without him. George was a highly individual kind of dog. He marched to a different drummer. While it was fairly common for a Graham dog to harry an occasional goat or kill a chicken now and then, George always leaned toward other prey. Sonny sat on the Store porch one summer evening watching George trot over the railroad tracks with some sort of strange object in his mouth. He flopped down in the Store yard and started gnawing his prize. It was a big old ear of corn he'd stolen from somebody's garden.

"You blame hound!" Sonny had to laugh. "If they catch you in their garden they'll fill yore skinny dog butt with buckshot!" George rolled a wild eye over at his boy and kept on chewing. Before that year's growing season was over, he'd brought home big tomatoes, a cucumber, a little green mushmelon, and several crook-neck squash, all

of which he ate completely. He was a hound dog with a taste for vegetables.

Sonny never took George coon hunting much, but baying up a tree was just something he came by naturally. He did get to run with Uncle Carney's pack on a few hunts, enough to understand that the sound of a gun meant a fat coon falling from a tree. He learned this so well, in fact, that on the Fourth of July when the Graham Gang was shooting off firecrackers and bottle rockets in the Store yard, he would run under the catalpa tree and start barking his head off. He'd look around, surprised and bewildered, when the boys hooted with laughter at him; then he'd retreat in dignity to his lair under the Store porch.

George led a charmed life. On more than one occasion he survived accidents that would have killed a normal dog. One of these times, Sonny thought sure he was a goner. He had followed Sonny down the path that led through the old cemetery, over the bluffs, across the narrow bridge in a tight curve of Highway 48, and down into the Loganson's yard. Sonny was a little ahead and had skipped down the bank off the road just as George was beginning to cross the bridge. Sonny's heart dropped into his stomach as he looked up to see a big black Chevy come swooshing around the curve and catch George in the middle of Mill Creek bridge with nowhere to escape.

"George! George look out!" Sonny yelled frantically, but the hound dog was overtaken before he could react. Like some horribly funny cartoon, Sonny watched helplessly as George was rolled over and over underneath the carriage of the Chevy. First one leg, then his head,

then his butt, then another leg, poked out from under the car in a crazy kaleidoscope, as if in slow motion. The car finally passed over him and screeched to a stop, but George didn't hang around for apologies. With a steady stream of hurt yelps, he raced across the highway, up over the chert bank on the other side, and over the hills and hollows clean out of hearing.

Sonny stood there calling his name while Mrs. Lorene Jenkins wrung her hands and said over and over, "I just didn't see him! I didn't see him on that bridge!" Sonny's shoulders drooped and his eyes filled with tears. He knew he'd never see old George again. "Hit's all right, Mrs. Jenkins. I know you didn't mean to hit him. He just didn't have nowhere to get out of the way." He turned and walked sadly back across the bridge and up the path for home. He didn't feel like visiting the Logansons now.

Sonny moped around for several days, then he knew he had to get over it, so life resumed its usual summer-time rhythm of swimming, baseball, and hide-and-seek. One evening about two weeks later, he and Mama Kent and Papa Kent were sitting on the Store porch soaking up the peace of the dusk when Papa Kent said, "What's that comin' over the tracks, Sonny?"

Sonny squinted his eyes to see through the fast fading light. A long shape was slowly, oh so slowly, making its way across the track. "I think it's George!" Sonny said excitedly, and he jumped up to run to him.

"You just stay here, boy," Papa Kent put out a hand to detain him. "Just let that hound dog find his way to where he wants to."

Sonny called his name softly as the dog made his way into the store yard. He was holding his head down low, so low his nose was leaving the faintest trail in the dust. His head was swollen as big as a grapefruit, and you could almost hear his poor joints creaking as he painstakingly put one foot in front of the other. He rolled his eyes up to look at his boy as he went by the porch steps, but he didn't stop. He went straight under the porch and they could hear him scratching to make up his bed in his lair back up by the chimney.

Sonny crawled under there with a pocket of biscuits and a bowl of water a little while later. George thumped his tail a few times and took some grateful licks from his water. Sonny talked to him in a low, soothing voice and told him how glad he was to see him. "I just knowed you was a goner, old George. I was powerful sad about it, too. Me and you is buddies." The dog laid his aching head down carefully on his paws, gave a snorting sigh, and went to sleep.

He was his old self in a week. You'd never know to look at him he'd had a close encounter with a piece of shit from Detroit. But for the rest of his life, whenever he followed his boy down the graveyard path and out onto the big road, he would stop, look, listen, then run like hell to make it over the Dreadful Bridge into the Louellen's yard.

All dogs get a little crotchety as they grow older, but George had some help from outside sources. When he was about three years old, he treed something in a tangle of blackberry bushes beside the road about fifty feet up from the Store. Sonny and Bobby were hanging out around the porch and they went to investigate. They came up even to the

excited dog and Sonny took a long stick and lifted back the veil of green briars to reveal an enormous rattlesnake coiled up on the ditch bank. The two boys looked at each other. This enemy must be killed. And what a story it would make!

"Go to the Store and ask Papa Kent to borrow his garden hoe," Sonny instructed Bobby. As Bobby ran off, Sonny turned toward his hound, who had been bellowing like crazy all this time. For one instant, Sonny's eyes met George's, and in that second, Sonny knew his dog's intent.

"No, George! No!" But it was too late. George had lunged across the ditch at the monster snake and, just as swiftly, the reptile struck back, embedding his fangs deeply in the dog's jaw just below his right eye. George gave a little whimper, he knew he'd been hurt bad, and backed off. Bobby came running back up with the hoe and the two boys soon chopped the snake into many pieces.

Sonny ran into the house and told Mama Kent about George's injury. She soaked a rag in coal oil and told Sonny to crawl up under the porch and squeeze the liquid into and around the bite holes on George's face. "Hit'll help draw the pizen out. Here, take him this here leftover biscuit." She crumbled the bread in a bowl and poured a good measure of bacon grease over it. "This hog fat will soak the pizen outta his blood."

Sonny found George curled up in his special spot by the chimney. Already the right side of his face was swelling, and Sonny could only imagine the headache the poor hound was gonna have come morning. He doctored his dog as well as he could, coaxed the greasy biscuit down his

throat, and patted him on the brown spot on his rump. "You sleep now, George. You'll be all right."

George did get over his bite, but not before his head swelled so much that his usually long ears stuck out on each side like little tabs. His right eye was blinded after that, and he tended to get a little antsy when people snuck up on him from that direction. In short, that rattler changed George from a dog who basically loved everybody into a dog who only loved a few. Pats on the head he would have easily tolerated before, he now regarded as possible threats. He was quicker to show his teeth and slower to answer a summons than he'd been before his encounter with the dragon.

One unfortunate person who had to learn this the hard way was Rob Parker. He was a big, soft-looking boy, one of the many children of the Parker clan who lived out toward Wrigley. Rob was never the world's deepest thinker, some even went so far as to call him slow. But he was a happy lad who wasn't unduly bothered by the woes and worries of the world. He skimmed along on the surface of life, taking the good things as they came and quickly forgetting the bad.

One summer morning a few months after the rattlesnake incident, Papa Kent and Sonny happened to be standing at the back screen door of the Store. They had been commenting on how the backyard garden looked when Papa Kent said, "Shhh. What in the world is that racket?" Sonny cocked his head and listened. Yeah, he could hear it. A kind of strange cross between a screech and yodel that seemed to be coming closer down Mill Creek road.

"Who in tarnation can it be? Walkin' along makin' such a noise?"

Sonny's guess was forestalled by the glimpse of movement he caught at the yard edge. Slinking along the ground, moving slowly but with evident purpose, crept George. Sonny nudged Papa Kent and pointed out the stalking dog. He nodded and pointed out to the road where the songster was now striding into sight. Boldly marching, flapping his arms, stepping high and singing to the heavens, Rob Parker was just a country boy feeling good. He didn't know the words to the song he was singing, he just substituted syllables and kept up the rhythm. "Dum, dee, dee . . . diddle, tum, tee." He wasn't worried about the volume. He was in the open air and felt he could be as loud as he liked. "Dum, dee, dee," he sang, grinning and flapping, while closer and closer George crept. He paused in the cover of the irises Mama Kent had planted along the edge of the bank. As Rob flopped by in his big brogan boots, George gave a spring over the ditch and, rushing up behind the annoying creature, bit him soundly in the ass!

"Yeowwwww!" Rob's song was cut off in mid-note. He looked frantically over his shoulder and started spinning and hollering as George hung on to the thick denim of his overalls. "Lordy! You let me go! Hey! Hey you George! Let me go! Ouchhhhh!" He gave a jerk, and with a ripping sound, George was dislodged from his britches' seat.

As the frightened boy ran stumbling around the corner of the Store, George slunk back up the bank and into the back entrance to his crawl space. Papa Kent and Sonny had witnessed this whole incident without saying a word. They turned from the back door and reentered the Store proper just as Rob came bursting in the front.

"He Bit Me! George, yore dog, he bit me, Sonny!" He stood there panting and heaving, eyes rolling white and frightened like a scared horse's.

Before Sonny could reply, Papa Kent spoke up. Now Papa Kent was a man of few words, so when he did speak, everybody generally listened closely. "Well, Rob Parker, if you hadn't been comin' up the road screechin' and flappin' like a buzzard, he wouldn't of bit ye."

Rob stood on one foot for a moment, thinking about that. His face cleared and he said, "Well, OK. Gimme a RC, please, Mr. Jessie."

George and Sonny were boon companions right up until Sonny joined the Navy. He took George up to Uncle Carney's in Ashland City before he shipped out. He thought he'd be happier there among other coon hounds and getting to go hunting with them every so often. But when he came back on his first leave, he learned from his Uncle Carney that old George had run away about three weeks after being brought there. No doubt he was wandering the hills and hollows, looking, always looking, for his boy Sonny.

MOONSHINE SURPRISE

Even though it was still early that summer morning, there was something in the air that let Sonny know it would be another scorcher. He sat on the edge of the Store porch swinging his legs and drinking an RC with peanuts in it. George was lying flat in a dust bed one of the chickens had wallowed out at the porch end. The chickens were scratching for June bugs and beetles, and talking quietly among themselves. Sonny didn't have a definite plan for the day, he figured he'd just let it play out however it would. Besides, he didn't usually have to go looking for adventure in Graham . . . it generally found him.

Sonny was just trying to knock the last peanut from the pop bottle into his mouth when he heard somebody running up the road. He sucked in the peanut just as Bill swung around the corner. He didn't stop to scratch behind George's ear, something he never failed to do, so Sonny knew right then that something was going on.

Bill walked up to Sonny and said, "Hey Sonny, wanna go huntin'?"

Since he knew Bill didn't like hunting and since it was definitely not hunting season, Sonny realized something was up. Bill just stood there grinning like a jackass eating saw-briars. It must be something BIG!

Sonny jumped off the porch, scattering the chickens. Both boys and the hound set off down the road at a trot. When they were out of earshot of the Store, Sonny asked, "What the hell's goin' on, Bill?"

"I just found ole' Clem Paton's moonshine still, that's what!"

"You done what?"

"Yep, 'n hit's got three barrels asetting' there 'n I rocked one of 'em and hit seemed almost half full!"

Clem Paton was THE bootlegger thereabouts and talk among the men was that his moonshine would flat put hair on your chest. And maybe even on your tongue. "Let's go!" shouted Sonny.

They raced off down the path that led past the spout spring, through Duck Hollow, and onto a little level place surrounded on three sides by slate bluffs. It was a still site, all right. A little spring bubbled up from the base of the rocks, and various bits of copper tubing, old oak buckets, and empty tote sacks that had held corn were scattered about. Towards the back, up against the bluff rock, were three hogshead barrels, corks in the bung holes, setting there solid and plain and holding heady visions of forbidden delight for two rowdy twelve-year-olds.

The boys whooped, and grabbing a couple of buckets, they ran and stood at the first barrel.

"This here's the one with the most," Bill said, "hit feels the heaviest."

Neither boy made a move to touch the barrel. They stood as if spellbound until old George ambled over and hiked his leg on the barrel at the end, marking territory even if it wasn't his.

"Come on, Bill," the spell was broken, "let's git us a taste of this here 'shine."

Sonny held the bucket and Bill pried out the cork with his pocket knife. A thin, milky-looking stream of liquid poured out into the

bucket, filling it several inches deep. Then, mysteriously, the stream lessened, trickled, and stopped altogether.

"Tilt that barrel, Bill. This here ain't enough for me, let alone you."

Bill obliged. He rocked and joggled the barrel until the stream resumed. After about fifteen minutes and several unexplained stoppages, the boys had filled two half-gallon buckets with the residue corn mash.

Jubilant, laughing like hyenas, they bent to their buckets and slurped up several mouthfuls. It tasted awful . . . sourish and yeasty, but, of course, neither one of them would let on to that. What did taste matter? They were drinking honest-to-God moonshine. They had crossed the threshold from childhood where everything had to taste good. When that corn mash slid down their throats and started a slow burn in the pit of their bellies, they grinned and forgot about the taste. They were MEN!

The boys, buckets, and George headed on back toward home. They stopped now and again to slurp their brew, and each time they did, it seemed more and more hilarious. In fact, Sonny had never realized what a witty fellow Bill was. Up until now, he'd thought him sort of solemn. Sonny had the reputation as the clown of Graham, but today Bill thought he was especially funny.

As the boys got closer to Mill Creek Road, they finished their brew and tossed the buckets into a weed patch. It wouldn't do to let Mama Kent or Mrs. Cantrel know what they had been doing, no sir. They'd be hided for sure. The boys swore to keep their outing secret, and parting, each went weaving up the road toward home.

Bill and Sonny didn't meet again until two days later. In fact, neither one was seen out and about much on the day following their adventure. Folks around the Store asked Papa Kent was Sonny sick. "As a mule," he said . . . but he wouldn't say with what.

On the afternoon of the second day, Bill straggled up the road and saw Sonny trying to walk the rail-top of the left side track, and he trotted to catch up with him. He stepped up on the top of the right track, and holding out both arms for balance, said, "Hey Sonny. What you been doin'?"

"Pukin'."

"Lordy, me too! I like to died. Mama said if she ever caught me in the 'shine again she'd whup the tar outta me. Reckon how she knowed I'd been drinkin'?"

"Cause you was pukin', fool."

"Oh. Yeah." Bill was concentrating hard to keep from falling off his track top. He had one more important revelation to make. "Sonny, you mind how the other day that 'shine wouldn't run outta the barrel right? Well, I went back up there yesterday evenin' and took the top off'n it, and if there wasn't the biggest possum I ever seen floatin' around down in there! He was all swole up and his hair was done gone! He must've climbed over in there and got too drunk to get out. Clem must've been drunk and just clapped the lid back on without seein' him in there. Ain't that somethin'?"

But Bill was talking to the air. Sonny was twenty feet behind him, hunkered over by the Columbia-to-Dickson railroad track, puking up his sockheels.

BREAKIN' IN THE YANKS

Along about the fourth of July every year, Graham was invaded. One day everything was normal as could be, and next morning, people's yards would be full of Pace Arrows and Winnebagos. Tents would sprout like weird mushrooms along the banks of Mill Creek, and a strange, nasal twang would be humming in the air, weaving around the snatches of conversation drifting from the Store. It was vacation time. The car plants were closed for two weeks up north and the kinfolk were down from Detroit.

Now Dee-troit, as they called it, exerted a subtle, somewhat sinister, influence over people in the neighborhood. It loomed like a fat spider in a glistening web of bright lights and money and seemed pretty appealing to some of the restless young men growing up in the hollows. When you work beside your daddy cutting cord wood for peanuts it's easy to fantasize about the fast life up there in the Big City way up there above the Mason/Dixon Line, where the bars stayed open round the clock and a hard-working fellow could make as much as five dollars an hour! And it wasn't just the money. It was the glamour, the excitement of being set loose in that thumping metropolis with your pockets stuffed with cash . . . it had a mighty big effect on the brain.

Take Albert Jintz. That boy came from the clan of Jintzes that lived all over Cash Holler like some kind of fungus and whose main abilities consisted of progenating and moonshining. He was a big, gangly boy, the oldest of eight children. His raw-boned wrists were always chapped and poking out of his worn flannel shirts and overalls.

And it was usually way up in the fall after the frost before any of these children put shoes on their feet. Tobacco-chewin', hog-sloppin', dirt poor, Albert was dumber than a box of rocks, but there wasn't any meanness in him. Let's just say he was easily led.

Anyway, it happened that when he turned seventeen he hopped on a Greyhound bus and went up to Detroit. Soon word came back that he had got on at the Ford plant and was making the high dollar. And sure enough, one day about three months after he'd left, here he came proudly bouncing over the railroad tracks at Graham in a big, green 1940 Ford with very little rust on it anywhere.

He pulled up by the Store and got out of his chariot. As he approached the steps, the citizens gathered there thought the dust was tricking their eyes, but no, as he shook hands all around they could see that Albert was a changed man. Gone were the tattered Duck-Head overalls and frayed flannel shirts. Now he sported a suave, pull-over sports shirt in a snazzy double-knit, lime green all over with white pockets, collar, and cuffs. His pants were of the same fabric, but thicker somehow, and were of a stunning hounds-tooth check in tan and yellow. Finally, and most magnificently of all, his large, flat feet were encased in two-tone loafers with bright new pennies in the inserts and with taps on the heels.

He laughed nasally at the expression on everybody's face. He snapped his fingers, and giving an awkward shuffle he thought of as dancing, he said, "Hey, youse guys! Whatcha been upta? Anything shakin' in this dead burg?" He shuffled again and started singing a

snatch of song in a fake bass. "Ababy ledda me be, yore liddle teddy bear . . . dum,dee,dee . . ."

"What you singing, Albert?" Sonny asked.

"What! Jesus Christ, youse guys! You mean to tell me you ain't heard Elvis Presley sing 'Teddy Bear'? Christ, youse 'er livin' in the boon docks!"

Albert clapped his hands to his face and shook his head, while the home folks sat there staring at him.

It is hard to believe that only three months in that city could turn a slow-talking, simple-minded country boy into the over-dressed idiot just described, but it surely happened. And it wasn't all that unusual. In fact, by Christmas of that year, the word was that Albert had married a bleached blond with four kids and was beginning to lose his hair.

Anyway, one morning after one year's invasion, Sonny was sitting on the Store porch in the sun, sipping on an RC and chewing a big wad of Bazooka bubble gum. He became aware of an approaching weird noise, and he leaned forward to look around the corner and up the road. Mincing down the road, bare-foot, knobby-kneed, possessed of long, skinny freckled legs and arms and a flaming red crew cut, was the strangest human being Sonny had ever seen. This apparition was limping and prancing along because the creek gravel scattered on the road was awful hard on tender Yankee feet. Yeah, it took several weeks of summer vacation and considerable wading and tromping to build up calluses strong enough to protect against Mill Creek gravel, and none but the year-round natives ever developed them.

Sonny's jaws slowed and stopped as he watched this creature come closer, and he realized that the noise he'd heard was a combination of heavy breathing and muttered cussing. As the stranger drew even with the store, he turned his head and Sonny could see the pimples and freckles thickly clustered on his face. He glared at Sonny and, without slowing his pace, said, "Whadda you lookin' at, you goddamnmutherfuckinsonuvabitch?"

Sonny's mouth dropped open and his gum had nearly fell out. He'd never heard so many cuss words strung together at once. Before he could formulate an answer to the alien's question, it had turned the corner and headed on up towards the Waters' place. There was a big, white Winnebago sitting there with Michigan plates on it, and the red-headed stranger disappeared inside it with a bang of the door.

It was always this way during the first few days of the invasion. The Yanks always swarmed over the place, making smart-ass remarks about the "hicks," sniggering about the way everybody talked (as if they didn't have an accent), and blowing snot out of their noses. The Graham gang had their methods of dealing with this attitude. And the game was played out, year after year.

Later on the same day, Sonny was telling the gang about his encounter with the red-headed alien, when here he came, leading a group of his Yank friends. They were tossing brand new baseballs in the air and swinging shiny Louisville sluggers to and fro. They stopped in the road and looked the Graham gang up and down where they lounged on the Store porch. Finally the red-head spoke. "Hey. Youse guys ever play any baseball?"

Bill and Tony exchanged glances with Donny and Bobby. Jimmy and Jerry shuffled their feet and half turned toward Sonny who answered for the group. "Yeah, we all play a little ball now and again."

"Well, come on then, hayseed. Let's get this show on the road."

The Yank boys teamed up against the Graham gang down in the field across from the store. Mr. Burnett had just cut hay off of it so it was in fine shape for a ball game. The Graham gang played ball, and played it well. The cover would generally be gone off of a new ball within a week or so, and they went through several bats a year. When you're used to playing with a lumpy, duct tape wrapped ball, and batting with old cracked bats, the opportunity to play with brand new equipment was like whipped cream.

The Yanks played the first inning or two with a lot of showy moves and raucous bragging in their nasal voices. But soon the raillery and bravado died down as they saw the score widen from five, to ten, to twenty runs in the Graham gang's favor. When the score was twenty-eight to seven, the red-headed alien threw down his new leather mitt, stomped his foot and blew snot as he announced his intention to quit. "I can't play in this HAY FIELD! Jesus H. Christ! Youse guys couldn't beat us on a regular diamond!"

Before tempers could flare from aggravation and humiliation, Sonny said loudly, "Hey, ya'll wanna go swimmin'? Hit'll shore cool you off." Several of the Yanks were interested in this plan, but the red-headed gangler just snorted and stomped off toward his Winnebago. He wanted to brood over his unfair defeat in private.

Sonny and the gang set off with the Yanks in tow. As they pressed deeper and deeper into the woods, Sonny reassured the Yankees that this was a short cut to the best swimming hole. When they had reached a point deep in Duck Holler, Tony hollered, "Now!", and the Graham gang scattered down the hillside and were soon out of sight in the leafy woods, leaving the citified Yanks alone and helpless, at the mercy of nature. Sonny and Tony ran a couple of hollows over and climbed a big maple tree where they had a good view of the Yanks floundering around in circles and they could hear their frantic shouts for help. "WAIITIT! YOUSE GUYS, WHERE ARE YA? COME BACK!"

When the shouting had faded into weak whimpers and the Yanks were sobbing and wiping snot on their shirt-tails, the gang reappeared.

"Come on,

ya'll. Whadder you waitin' for?" The Yanks clustered around their saviours and soon all were splashing and whooping in the exquisitely cold Mill Creek.

Some version of this scenario was played out year after year. And, as soon as the Graham Gang had whipped them into a state of humility, the Yanks would mellow out and turn into pretty decent fellows. It's like it took them a few days to shed the Detroit shell of snottiness that built up over the year and return to a semblance of home folk.

Most of the boys that day came around nicely, but the red-headed gangler never did. He kept to himself for the rest of the trip and never missed a chance to belittle Graham and its country ways. Sonny heard, years later, that the alien had been arrested and convicted of

raping a mentally retarded girl up in his River Rouge, Detroit neighborhood. He was disgusted and dismayed by the revelation, but he wasn't particularly surprised. He realized that the answer to the alien's question of, "What 'cha lookin' at you godammutherfuckin-sonofabitch?" was simply, "A dumb-ass, booger-headed Yankee, I guess."

HIDE-AND-SEEK

In the summer of 1958, Sonny was about to turn sixteen. He had been feeling somewhat out-of-sorts with himself for a while. It didn't seem like he wanted to do any of the things he used to do. Hunting was no good, fishing was boring, riding bikes, playing ball, all of it just seemed like a waste of time somehow. Even school had turned into some place he didn't want to be over the last year. In fact, ever since his first wet dream, all his old childhood pursuits seemed pointless and tame. The only game left that interested him any was a good game of hide and seek on a dark summer night. Then, running and searching out a covert spot all within the count of fifty, he felt a glimmer of that old excited kid feeling he seemed to be losing.

As good as this game always seemed to be, Graham had a visitor in the last days of that summer of '58 that added an extra bit of kick to it. Miss Judy Gayle Dobbins was down for a visit with her cousins, the Louellens. She lived with her parents in Nashville, and had been a regular summer visitor for many years. But when she appeared this year, she was different, anybody could see that. Sonny had always thought of her as a skinny, shy girl who was nice enough but nobody you'd look twice at. Well, when she came strolling up to the Store yard one twilight with Jimmy, Jerry, and Jackie, Sonny looked three or four times. Man! Had she ever filled out and prettied up! She seemed to be aware of this change herself. Where before she would smile and mumble something inaudible to most remarks aimed at her, this night she spoke right up, laughed and joked like the most confident person in the world.

Sonny wasn't the only person interested in this change in Judy

Gayle. Bobby Peters eyed her pretty seriously, too, and soon he was doing tricks on his bicycle up and down the road under Judy Gayle's appreciative eye.

"Ah, shoot. She wouldn't look twice at me with Bobby around," Sonny thought as he watched his friend show out. It wasn't in Sonny's nature to try to act out and make a fool of himself for attention. He was a person who kept his own counsel. So he had pretty much given up any thought of getting to know Judy Gayle better by the time someone suggested a game of hide and seek.

Jerry lost the "one potato, two potato" count off, so he had to be "it" first. As he started counting, Sonny ran around the corner of the store, and on to the other side of the big viburnum hedge behind the house. When he reached his destination, he was surprised to find Judy Gayle close on his heels, panting slightly.

"Well . . . hello!" Sonny said breathlessly.

"Hello, yourself," Judy Gayle replied, smiling.

"I thought you'd be hiding with Bobby," Sonny said, wanting to get his facts straight before feeling too excited about her presence.

"No. I'd rather hide with you," she looked straight in his eyes with a little smile on her mouth.

"Well, come on then. I know a real good place to hide." Sonny boldly reached out and grabbed her hand. They ran through the backyard on up the road toward the Waters' old shed. Sonny held open the door and they slipped inside the dark space, waiting a few moments until their eyes adjusted to the darkness.

"There's an old buggy over here, Judy Gayle. It's got a top on

it. Won't nobody think of looking for us here." Sonny led her over to the dusty carriage and helped her climb up on the passenger side. Then he went around and swung himself into the driver's seat, stirring up a small cloud of dust and sending some small creature scuttling for a corner of the shed.

The two young people sat there, not talking. Sonny was staring straight ahead, not that she could have known it if he'd been staring straight at her. It was that dark.

"I guess he's finished counting by now." There was a nervous quaver in Judy Gayle's voice. "He ought to be out looking right now."

"Yeah." Sonny couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Do you reckon we can hear it when he hollers 'Olly Olly outs in free'?"

"Yeah." His hands were beginning to sweat.

"Do you reckon we can make it back to home before he catches us?" Judy Gayle was awful concerned with the ins and outs of this game.

"Yeah." A feeling of queasiness was starting low in his stomach. He began to understand that if this thing was going to get off the ground, it was all up to him.

Judy Gayle leaned forward in the seat. "What's that? Did you hear that?"

"What?" Sonny couldn't hear anything except the beat of his own heart.

"Sounded like somebody yelling."

"It was probably just Jerry letting everybody know he's done counting." Sonny edged closer to Judy Gayle on the dusty seat. "He'll never find us here."

Sonny slipped his arm along the back of the seat, so when Judy Gayle settled back, it was easy for him to slip his hand onto her shoulder and pull her body a little closer to his. She didn't resist this move. Sonny's heart was beating like a trip hammer.

He leaned forward in his seat as if he were trying to decipher the shouting in the distance. "Probably Jimmy or some of them making a break for home." He turned his head while making this pronouncement and his mouth brushed Judy Gayle's cheek. She turned her head toward that warmth, and their lips met and clung together for a moment. His arm tightened on her shoulders and she lifted her arms and wrapped them around his neck. They were both beginning to breathe hard and Sonny could feel her heart pounding against him through their clothes.

They broke apart long enough to gulp some air and then were liplocked again. Sonny was about to bust his jeans fly, and Judy Gayle's lips were starting to puff up. He touched the tip of his tongue to her lips, lightly licking them. She moaned in her throat and parted them slightly. As he slid his tongue into her hot mouth, Sonny felt a feeling unlike any he'd ever experienced. It was like all the good times: the excitement of Christmas, catching your first fish, learning to ride your bike alone, swimming under water with your eyes open. It was all the wonderful feelings of childhood rolled up into one rush and intensified a hundred times. Before that first open-mouth kiss was over, Sonny and Judy Gayle were deeply in love.

They eventually wandered back to the group, but for the rest of Judy Gayle's two week visit, they were basically in a world of their own. Sonny had never wanted to be with another human being as much as he wanted to be with her. George was the only creature up to this point that he felt this secure with. He just felt like he could tell her anything. They went swimming together, walking together. He told her he felt like he needed to be getting out of Graham soon. She told him about the many ways her step-father made her life miserable back in Nashville. They held hands and kissed until their lips were chapped and sore. They were each other's everything for two glorious weeks. And it was wonderful.

After Judy Gayle had to go back home, Sonny thought he would die. He walked by himself up and down the railroad tracks, hanging his head onto his chest, singing "Big Midnite Special" under his breath. He missed her so bad he didn't think he could stand it another minute, but he knew he had to. He couldn't say anything about it to anyone either. Couldn't talk to anyone about it. They all ragged him a good bit after she left. Actually they'd been ragging him before she left, but he hadn't heard them. He would wander out to the back steps after supper and look up at the stars shining in the dark sky over Graham and wonder if she was seeing the same sight up in Nashville.

They wrote letters back and forth for a few weeks. His were short and terse. He didn't know how to commit his feelings to paper. She wrote him back in words more satisfactory, telling him she felt like a tomato plant that had been snatched out of the moist ground and left to wither up in the sun. She swore she would love him for all enduring

time and she spoke about the good times they would have next summer when she made her yearly visit.

Sonny tried to hang on to the feeling, but as the school year started, Judy Gayle's letters became few and far between and finally petered out all together. Sonny was uptown at the Senior High School, but he could have been on the moon for all the interest he took in it. The place of his childhood, the friends of his youth, were somehow becoming vaguely irritating to him. He felt like he just wanted to bust out screaming sometimes. He felt like he wanted to move to another universe and change his name and be somebody no one knew or expected things from. Sonny was growing up and growing out. It's not that he didn't love his folks and friends anymore. It was more like needing to be more, to see more than they would ever expect him to. The place that had always seemed so big to him, had become tight and small. He knew he had to break out.

By late summer of the following year, Sonny had dropped out of school and was as antsy as a worm in hot ashes. He didn't know what he was going to do, but he knew he had to think of something quick. His momma was talking about him coming up to Nashville to live with her and get a job in the boot factory where she worked. Sonny knew if he didn't come up with his own plan soon, he'd have to do just that. The thought was definitely not appealing.

One night in late August, he and Tony and Mama Kent strolled out onto the porch of the house and stood for a minute listening to the whippoorwills in the fields around. As they breathed deeply of the

night air Tony said, "Look up there. What is that? Hit don't look like no airplane."

The trio looked up and saw a small, blinking red light moving slowly but steadily across the sky. "Yore right, Tony," Mama Kent said, "hit ain't no airplane. They have white lights on them, too, not just red."

They watched the craft for a few more minutes. "Hey!" Sonny had an idea. "I bet it's that Russian thing they been talking about. I bet it's that Spudneck . . . Spitneck . . . Sputnik! Yeah that's what it's called. I heard 'em talkin' about it down at the Centerville Barber Shop the other day. The Russians has got that thing up in orbit of the earth." They watched it pass in a silent arc overhead.

"Well, I guess we're all livin' in a different world, all right. Why when I was a young woman, I remember the stir the automobile made throughout these parts. I remember our preacher saying hit was a sign the end of the world was nigh. Hee, hee, hee. I bet old Mr. Fairfield is spinning in his grave over this 'un." The boys laughed with Mama Kent.

Sonny looked up into that infinite night. He made up his mind in that moment to catch the Greyhound bus up to Nashville on the following Monday and go talk to the Marine recruiter about joining up.

As the trio walked back toward the house, Sonny reached up to pick a ripe winesap apple off the old twisted tree in the yard. As he tugged on the fruit, the whole burdened limb cracked off and fell down on his head, scattering apples all around. Tony and Mama Kent busted out laughing, and Sonny, too. "You jest don't know yore own strength," Mama

Kent giggled. She held out her apron to make a pouch, and the boys gathered up all the fallen fruit and piled it in. Sonny watched Tony and Mama Kent walking back into the yellow-lighted kitchen, talking about the fine apple pie they'd have for dinner tomorrow. He glanced up at the sky again. Sputnik had disappeared.

When Sonny went to the Marine recruiter's office in the federal courthouse building in Nashville, he found it all locked tight. A terse note on the door informed anyone interested that Sergeant McGraw was out and would return the following morning. Sonny stood there, hands shoved in his pockets, wondering what to do next. A large voice boomed from the other end of the hall.

"YOU LOOKING FOR A HOME, BOY?"

Sonny turned his head to see a tall, broad man in a smart blue uniform looking at him with interest from a few doors down.

"Yeah." Sonny's voice broke slightly on the words.

"Well, come on down here. We'll see what we can do."

Three weeks later, Sonny was in a military transport plane heading to Navy basic training camp in San Diego, California. He'd taken leave of his kinfolk and Graham without a moment's regret. Yes, he was definitely doing the right thing, getting out of Graham. He settled back in his window seat, listening to the drone of the airplane's four engines. He looked out the window down onto the flat, fertile fields of the Midwest stretched out below. In various shades of green and yellow, brown and gold, the squares of acreage reminded him of Mama Kent's Sunday apron. The motion and monotony of the plane lulled him to sleep, and on the way to a brand new world, he dreamed about Graham.

VITA

Jimmie Lynn Barrett was born in Woodbury, Tennessee November 15, 1957. She graduated from Riverdale High School in May 1975. She attended Middle Tennessee State University for two years. After an extended period of raising three stepchildren, Ms. Barrett entered Austin Peay State University in Fall 1991. She graduated Phi Kappa Phi with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English in Spring 1993. Ms. Barrett will receive her Master of Arts degree in English in December 1995. She is presently employed as Adjunct Faculty for Austin Peay State University and Columbia State Community College.