

Sweet and Sour

By Zi Graves

Ish & I

Since I have been writing about my younger days and many of the memories Ish and I shared in those years I had better get a few more in before they take their place in the dark regions of an old storage bin and get lost. This was one of the joys of having him close by these last few years. And this past year he has taken me to places and happenings when we were young that must have been written by pencil instead of ink, for they were faint when I coated them out of hiding. When he was ill enough to give up his piddling around with odd jobs, he always needed to have something to do, said it kept him from getting old, we would sit and talk for a change. It was then he brought back memories I had all but forgotten.

One of the earliest episodes I remember was him taking my hand and pulling me after him to hide under the house so Mom couldn't punish us for wetting the bed. Now we were only babies, perhaps two and four, but Mom made no allowances for age, she wanted dry beds. (Punishment did not stop it, age and control did.) But under that floor was dry dirt with doodle bugs that could be coaxed out if one knew the secret of getting them to, he knew the secret. Again, he brought back the picture of Dad sleeping under the "cow cliff"—one in a series of cliffs close to our house that probably had been the home for Indians in the past. Now it was known as the "cow cliff" for cows sought the coolness and space to rest in during the warm days of summer and protection in the winter. It was a comfortably cool room, and big enough for a cot, so dad chose to sleep there when he was on the night shift at the brickyard. He not only reaped the benefits of the cool space, and lack of flies buzzing around his face, he also escaped the noise of little kids interrupting his sleep. Ish also reminded me of the stories told of my two older brothers catching snakes and teaching him how to hold them while they tied strings around their necks. Then, I remembered hearing Jim and George laugh, when they got together in their adult years, and told about the time they played when they were little boys living on Perry Branch, such as catching snakes and tying them up in a tree and leave them there. They must have been pretty little boys.

And he remembered all the moves we made from one house to another. The first one I remembered was when we moved from where I was born to the one just above my grandparents' home on Henderson Branch, in Olive Hill, Ky. That was an exciting move for me. We moved into a bigger and nicer house than the one I was born in and our lifestyle changed. This was the house with a high front porch across the front and when Mom went to church, just across the hollow from us, Dad would call us to come and sit there and listen closely so we could hear mom and Grandpa lead the singing. She had a clear soprano voice that could be heard a long distance away and Grandpa's deep tenor voice was a perfect match for it. That may have been where I learned to appreciate good voices and harmony. We have always been a family of music lovers. And especially of voices that never seemed to be strained when a high note was reached. Mom's was one of these.

Ish took me back to the time our little cousin died with whooping cough and we were allowed to go see her at the viewing only if we pulled up fresh young onions from the garden and, as dad said, "chaw on them while you are there." He had been taught chewing on fresh green onions would keep us from getting the dread disease. It just may have done that, for we did not get it then.

The two room school was close by and Ish began his schooling here. He

remembered how mom would dampen his hair after combing it with a part on the side. She was always a stickler for having kids go to school with clean hands and faces and nicely combed hair, parted in the right place. He also remembered me of the train road where a little engine, called a "dinky," drew a train of several small cars that hauled clay from the hills to the brickyard where dad worked. So, some times mom would get permission to take us to her mom's just beyond the mines, on the train. We would be placed in the second car, for there was no room in the tiny cab for more than one engineer. Then come back home the same way after spending the day at Grandma's house.

I guess this was about the time an incident occurred I do not remember ever happening. He said I pushed him out an open window and when he fell he landed on a piece of glass and cut his foot. He was not known to tell an outright lie, so I must have been the mean little sister he says I was. But I couldn't have been more than three or four, at the most, so I would like to believe he had been teasing me and I retaliated. He definitely was a tease. But the teasing was always done with a smile, showing rows of sparkling white teeth. Maybe he had just tweaked my hair, a habit he had, and I didn't like it. Anyway that set a pattern for our life. Even as teenagers and young adults he did the teasing. I, the retaliating. Never in anger, my retaliating, when my apron would be lying on the floor or my sash untied, would be, now just why did you have to do that?

During the last few weeks of his illness he said the couch was more comfortable than the bed so that was where I would find him when I went to check upon him. He was not one to give up and he seemed to know when he took to the bed it would be his final move. So I always found him dressed, as if ready to go out, and lying on the couch. His cane, which was also a new addition to his trying to "stay active," close by. Sometimes I could coax a faint remembrance of a smile from the grimace of pain on his face when I would reverse his teasing, then follow it with, "ah-ha, got you that time."

On one of these visits, I think it was the day I relieved Pauline, so she could take care of some business, I was sitting close enough so we could understand each other, both of us have problems hearing. I was massaging his feet and legs with lotion. One leg and foot was finished and I could see he was too weak and tired to lift the other so I offered to do it later. Oh, no you don't get easy, always finish what you start, don't you remember the rule we were raised with? I was more than glad to finish it. Then he was refreshed enough to go back to our early days again. He seemed to be trying to crowd every memory of his past into these last days. This was of our visit to Grandma's when we were young teenagers. Mom wanted to visit her mother and Ish and I took her. After helping grandpa get in some corn for lunch Ish and I went to pick blackberries for a pie. There was a nice patch of them just above the house so we didn't have to change clothes. Soon after arriving on the hillside, and in the midst of the berry patch, I heard birds calling to one another, and they sounded so close I stopped picking long enough to see where they were. And sure enough they were close, circling just above Ish's head and he was talking to them in their language. I had known before he could mock them but this was my first time to witness it. And it wasn't just one kind, there were Robins, searching for their mate, Sparrows fluttering around and I can't remember the others, but I do remember several kinds coming to

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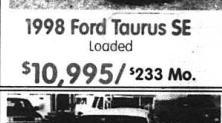
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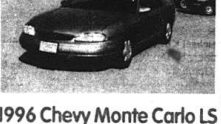
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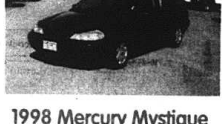
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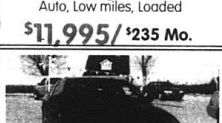
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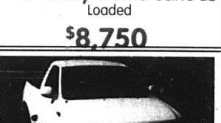
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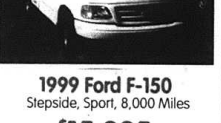
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