HARRY CREWS

Pages from the Life
of a Georgia Innocent

Not very long ago I went with my twelve-year-old boy to a Disney movie, one of those things that show a farm family, poor but God knows honest, out there on the land building character through hunger and hard work. The hunger and hard work seemed to be a hell of a lot of fun. The deprivation was finally so rewarding you could hardly stand it. The farm was full of warm, fuzzy, furry, damp-nosed creatures: bawling calves and braying mules and dogs that were treated like people. There was a little pain here and there but just so much as would teach important lessons to all of us. It sometimes even brought a tear to the eye, but not a real tear because the tear only served to prove that a family out in the middle of nowhere scratching in the earth for survival didn’t have it so bad after all. Somebody was forever petting and stroking the plump little animals, crooning to them, as they were raised for strange, unstated reasons, but surely not to be castrated and slaughtered and skinned and eaten. They were, after all, friends.

If somebody got sick, he’d just pop into an old, rattling but trustworthy pickup truck and go off to town, where a kindly doctor would receive him immediately into his office and effect an instant cure by looking down his throat and asking him to say Ah. No mention was made of payment.

As my boy and I came out of the movie, blinking in the sunlight, it occurred to me that Disney and others—the folks who bring you The Waltons, say, or The Little House on the Prairie—had managed to sell this strange vision of poverty and country life not only to suburbanites, while the suburbanites stuffed themselves with malt balls and popcorn, but also to people in little towns throughout the South who had proof in their daily lives to the contrary.

All fantasy. Now there is nothing wrong with fantasy. I love it, even live off it at times. But driving home, the reality behind the fantasy began to go bad on me. It seemed immoral and dangerous to show so many smiles without an occasional glimpse of the skull underneath.

As we were going down the driveway, my boy, Byron, said: “That was a great movie, huh, Dad?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Great.”

“I wish I could’ve lived in a place like that,” he said.

“No, you don’t,” I said. “You just think you do.”

My grandmother in Bacon County, Georgia, raised biddies: tiny cheeping bits of fluff that city folk allow their children to squeeze to death at Easter. But city children are not the only ones who love biddies; hawks love them, too. Hawks like to swoop into the yard and carry off one impaled on their curved talons. Perhaps my grandmother, in her secret heart, knew that hawks even then were approaching the time when they would be on the endangered-species list. Whether she did or not, I’m sure she often felt she and her kind were already on the list. It would not do.

I’ll never forget the first time I saw her get rid of a hawk. Chickens, as everybody knows, are cannibals. Let a biddy get a spot of blood on it from a scrape or a raw place and the other biddies will simply eat it alive. My grandmother penned up all the biddies except the puniest one, already half pecked to death by the other cute little bits of fluff, and she set it out in the open yard by itself. First, though, she put arsenic on its head. I—about five years old and sucking on a sugar-tit—saw the hawk come in low over the fence, its red tail fanned, talons stretched, and nail the poisoned biddy where it squatted in the dust. The biddy never made a sound as it was carried away. My gentle grandmother watched it all with satisfaction before she let her other biddies out he pen.

Another moment from my childhood that comes instantly to mind was about a chicken, too; a rooster. He was boss cock of the whole farm, a magnificent bird nearly two feet tall. At the base of a chicken’s throat is its craw, a kind of pouch into which the bird swallows food, as well as such things as grit, bits of rock and shell. For reasons I don’t understand they sometimes become crawbound. The stuff in the craw does not move; it remains in the craw and swells and will ultimately cause death. That’s what would have happened to the rooster if the uncle who practically raised me hadn’t said one day: “Son, we got to fix him.”

He tied the rooster’s feet so we wouldn’t be spurred and took out his castrating knife, honed to a razor’s edge, and sterilized it over a little fire. He soaked a piece of fine fishing line and a needle in alcohol. I held the rooster on its back, a wing in each hand. With the knife my uncle split open the craw, cleaned it out, then sewed it up with the fishing line. The rooster screamed and screamed. But it lived to be cock of the walk again.

Country people never did anything worse to their stock than they sometimes were forced to do to themselves. We had a man who farmed with us, a man from up north somewhere who had drifted down into Georgia with no money and a mouth full of bad teeth. Felix was his name and he was good with a plow and an ax, a hard worker. Most of the time you hardly knew he was on the place, he was so quiet and well-mannered. Except when his teeth began to bother him. And they bothered him more than a little. He lived in a shedlike little room off the side of the house. The room didn’t have much in it: a ladder-back chair, a kerosene lamp, a piece of broken glass hanging on the wall over a pan of water where he shaved as often as once a week, a slat-board bed, and in one corner a chamber pot—which we called a slop jar—for use in the middle of the night when nature called. I slept in a room on the other side of the wall from him. I don’t remember how old I was the night of his terrible toothache, but I do remember I was still young enough to wear a red cotton gown with five little pearl buttons down the front my grandmother had made for me.

When I heard him kick the slop jar, I knew it was his teeth. I just didn’t know how bad it was. When the ladder-back chair splintered, I knew it was a bad hurt, even for Felix. A few times that night I managed to slip off to sleep only to be jarred awake when he would run blindly into the thin wall separating us. He groaned and cursed, not loudly but steadily, sometimes for as long as half an hour. Ordinarily, my mother would have fixed a hot poultice for his jaw or at least tried to do something, but he was a proud man and when he was really dying from his teeth, he
preferred to suffer, if not in silence, at least by himself. The whole house was kept awake most of the night by his thrashing and groaning, by the wash pan being knocked off the shelf, by his broken shaving mirror being broken again, and by his blind charges into the wall.

See, our kindly country dentist would not have gotten out of his warm bed for anything less than money. And Felix didn’t have any money. Besides, the dentist was in town ten miles away and we didn’t have a rattling, trustworthy old truck. The only way we had to travel was two mules. And so there was nothing for Felix to do but what he was doing and it built practically no character at all. Looking back on it now, I can see that it wasn’t even human.

The sounds coming through the wall sure as hell weren’t human anyway. On a Georgia dirt farm, pain reduced everything—man and beast alike—to the lowest common denominator. And it was pretty low and pretty common. Not something you’d want to watch while you ate malt balls and popcorn.

I was huddled under the quilts shaking with dread—my nerves were shot by the age of four and so they have remained—when I heard Felix kick open the door to his room and thump down the wooden steps in his heavy brogan work shoes, which he’d not taken off all night. I couldn’t imagine where he was going but I knew I wanted to watch whatever was about to happen. The only thing worse than my nerves is my curiosity, which has always been untempered by pity or compassion, a serious character failing in most societies but a sanity-saving virtue in Georgia when I was a child.

It was February and I went out the front door barefoot onto the frozen ground. I met Felix coming around the corner of the house. In the dim light I could see the craziness in his eyes, the same craziness you see in the eyes of a trapped fox when it has not quite been able to chew through its own leg. Felix headed straight for the well, with me behind him, shakin in my thin cotton gown. He took the bucket from the nail on the rack built over the open well and sent it shooting down hard as he could to break the inch of ice that was over the water. As he was drawing the bucket up on the pulley, he seemed to see me for the first time.

“What the hell, boy! What the hell!” His voice was as mad as his eyes and he either would not or could not say anything else. He held the bucket and took a mouthful of the freezing water. He held it a long time, spat it out, and filled his mouth again.

He turned the bucket loose and let it fall again into the well instead of hanging it back on the nail where it belonged. With his cheeks swelling with water he took something out of the back pocket of his overalls. As soon as I saw what he had I knew beyond all belief and good sense what he meant to do, and suddenly I was no longer cold but stood on the frozen ground in a hot passion waiting to see him do it, to see if he could do it.

He had a piece of croker sack about the size of a half-dollar in his left hand and a pair of wire pliers in his right. He spat the water out and reached way back in his rotten mouth and put the piece of sack over the tooth. He braced his feet against the well and stuck the pliers over in the sackcloth. He took the pliers in both hands and immediately a forked vein leapt in his forehead. The vein in his neck popped big as a pencil. He pulled and twisted and pulled and never made a sound.

It took him a long time and finally as he fought with the pliers and with himself his braced feet slipped so that he was flat on his back when the blood broke from his mouth, followed by the pliers holding a tooth with roots half an inch long. He got slowly to his feet, sweat running off his face, and held the bloody tooth up between us.

He looked at the tooth and said in his old, recognizable voice: “Huh now, you sumbitch!”

LOREN EISELEY

The Brown Wasps

There is a corner in the waiting room of one of the great Eastern stations where women never sit. It is always in the shadow and overhung by rows of lockers. It is, however, always frequented—not so much by genuine travelers as by the dying. It is here that a certain element of the abandoned poor seeks a refuge out of the weather, clinging for a few hours longer to the city that has fathered them. In a precisely similar manner I have seen, on a sunny day in midwinter, a few old brown wasps creep slowly over an abandoned wasp nest in a thicket. Numbed and forgetful and frost-blackened, the hum of the spring hive still sounded faintly in their sodden tissues. Then the temperature would fall and they would drop away into the white oblivion of the snow. Here in

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