



Before and After

Stories by Jim Perkins

LIFE REVISITED

c Sept., 1997

Brothers and Sis were two houses over from where mom was. They were playin' in the front room of my aunt's house where the coal stove sat. It was twenty degrees out and snow was all over the ground. Dad was drivin' from Detroit without a hint what was happenin' and no way to let him know. Mammy took care of Mom til Dr. Obrian arrived. The hospital lay forty mile away cross the Cumberland Mountain. She didn't want to go too. She had never been and she wasn't goin' now. That was the way in the hills. The side of the mountain saw new life on that cold and snowy winter day. The twelfth day into that year, an innocence awakened to the world. Gloriously new and fresh to all things. There was no malice nor fear nor understandin' of such things in the strong and tiny miracle heart.

A view past the tar paper and board and battan gave light to the red clay path and road leadin' to the shallow valley below. The dirt road led to everywhere and most of the time back again. That's how life is and always will be. All comes and goes.

The ridges where the mountain people live never have had much to offer and it's easy to see why. Red clay won't grow a thing except brush, Kudzu, and them old knotty nigger pines. Hard life and hard people with a fondness for the mountains. That was the easy thing to see. The mornin' hours just before the sun burned off the fog seemed in particular to be most lonely in the ridges. No one around, just you walkin' the road to a relative's or just standin' along the tracks. No train come by that early. It was too quiet and the hills wouldn't take to any interruption durin' this changin' time of the day. A weary stray might stare at you from it's grass bed in the brush, haggard like the bums down past the depot. It didn't know if you was goin' to run it off or offer your hand. The air smelled like no future might smell if it had an odor to it. It made you want to get away and away is exactly where my family went. In Baltimore Dad welded in the shipyard. The war was goin' then and a lot of mountain people went to Baltimore. Most didn't stay though. Baltimore seemed like a trial place for all of us. It was a place to see if you could take to the strangeness of bein' away from the hills. Mom and Dad stayed and relatives began to follow. Two rooms was all there was and a hallway separated them. One was the bedroom and the other was where you could cook. There's a picture of Mom and Dad and Sis on a tar roof just outside a screen doorway to the hall. Sis played on that roof, five stories up. Beat down and hard...hard as an old stomped floor with a rancid smell.

After the war in Europe everybody found themselves back down home to renew themselves. "Just Over In The Glory Land"... That's where Dad found himself. A tent revival was in town. It was religion, entertainment, and just plain relief for everybody. Tired of tryin' and tryin' with little success, the whole community was there night after night, searchin'. Dad went and that was a fair amount. He had taken a rougher road earlier in life and now the stress and joy and work for the family softened that road. He went up and got saved. There was peace, not necessarily in the valley, but peace just the same. Shortly afterwards, he became ordained and started preachin'. He preached and people from everywhere came and listened. He had the gift, it was plain. Respected and regarded, Dad had been called. He made his mark with the gift given him.

Durin' this time of preachin, it alone could not sustain the family. Dad drove the bus line to the plants but, after the bomb was dropped that soon played out. He bought a ten ton tandem wheel truck to haul coal from the tipples, however, findin' tin cans and smashin' em with the huge tires was all he really found that was steady. This was no livin' so, Dad cut his losses and went on. He still preached but not as often. He went north himself first. There was work in Indiana, then the bus line in Detroit and finally in Cincinnati doin' some sort of drivin. We were at least fed. Dad found a town up north that suited him and he sent for us. He parked cars and worked two and three jobs, any job, just for his family.

There we were right smack amid what would be a not so sweet an awakenin'. Accents and culture soon became somethin' fights and conflicts were made of. Down home people didn't know it but soon enough colored town, run down tenements, and a prejudice that ate you alive was part of everyday life. "Southern Exodus", there could be no other name for it.

Seems like every relative to come up the pick stayed with us. My Dad never said a thing though, not that he was a quiet man. I guess because he was only tryin' to survive too. Most went back. The strain from bein' away from the mountains was too much for all except the strongest or desperate. The pull drug 'em back like a magnet. My family had better stock though. We made it that way. That's how we survived. Everybody from down home lived in a certain section of town back in those times. Mostly on the fringes of colored town. But, still close enough to the see uptown and know the aggravation brought on by bein' different.

Landlords didn't want to rent to mountain people with children so, it was hunt for whatever you could find. We lived with cockroaches and varmints people wouldn't let their dogs live with. The wall paper from decades past was always peelin' off and scribbled on from the children who had been before us. I remember the long two and three story buildings that at one time were great houses. They were now apartments and boarding rooms that should've long ago been condemned. Third Street is the first place my memory can recall. It only had two rooms. One was the livin' room, which served as our bedroom, and the kitchen, where everything went on.

We took baths there, played there durin' cold weather and relatives even slept in the big closet next to the refrigerator. The only bathroom was upstairs and was a common one used by every renter in the building. It had a ten foot ceiling and above the door was a window that tilted in to let the air draft. Mom and Dad slept in the double bed with me between them while my brothers slept on the couch that let down to where two could sleep. One to the head and one to the foot. Sis slept on a roll away bed in the kitchen.

There were many shabby traps before then that my memory doesn't recall. There was Wilkerson Street (next to the bus depot), Second street, and many more... Next to the apartment on Third street was Saint Mary's street, which was really an alley connectin' the bigger streets. Part of it is still there separatin' two big brick buildings, Red Cross and Ohio Bell. There's a large college with the biggest grass lawn us kids could only dream about sittin' where so many people came and went and cried and laughed and worked hours on end while they fought the northern cold 'til it hurt. Inside and out. It hurt so bad. (Durin' this time Dad started the "Ringold Street Southern Missionary Baptist Church" and that helped us all. All southerners, all in need, they attended regularly. The church has grown since those early days forty somethin' years ago. It's in the southern outer section of town known as Kettering. It's very blessed, very big and a new type church. I know there are a few original members there, but how many others remember how it all began?)

There was a U-Haul trailer storage there in the alley just feet from our apartment. The trailers, some open some enclosed, were all secured by a huge chain to a steel post or the wrought iron fence that separated the apartments from the alley. Inside the trailers was a haven for the drunks that staggered around town stinkin' drunk from liquor and homeless til they found the small shelters where they slept until the next mornin'. They'd start all over again stinkin' and smellin' and drunk. Kids lived there! Decent people lived there by circumstance alone. People survived. Mom and Dad raised us and suffered through the poverty and prejudice without my young mind knowin', however, I'm sure my brothers and Sister knew well about the filth and doin' without. They knew it was all they could do and time alone would cure it or make it worse.

The city gave us our shots and our clothes were bought from the bins at the Goodwill

and Salvation Army up on fifth street and Wayne Avenue. Because of all the drunks we use to call it Filth and Wine streets. Life was difficult because new comers are seldom welcome, especially if they were from the mountains and threatened the lives around them.

Imagine the toll it had on all those souls from the mountains. Good or bad, this and that, we all lived that way for a very long while. I wonder if the landlords that owned the hideous dwellings where we lived would know that one day these same outsiders would go on to thrive and rent and own better than anyone could have ever wished for? It happened as time went on and as all things that learn to survive in the poorest conditions, we grew stronger. Dad got a union job drivin' pick-up trucks and delivery type trucks from job site to job site. He rented us a small house on the east side. Life was better and I knew it even if I was a kid. We were doin' all right even if the neighborhood was still rough. It was still in town but, far from the dirty yards void of grass and wide busy streets we had grown use to. There was a small bathroom, a little livin' room, two bedrooms and a parlor! We didn't even know what a parlor was except maybe just another word for Sis' bedroom. That was until she got married. She married a fellow from the hills, just another state. She was sixteen then. My Dad married them right there in that parlor of all places!

One day my oldest brother took me to one of his friend's home. The house was in a neighborhood that sat much higher on the hill than ours and it was a fair amount different. It was almost like bein' in a different world. This was really somethin' new... I marveled at the way they lived. There was a television in a big livin' room where the man sat smokin' and readin'. A boy about my age lay on the floor. The house was great. It had two stories and wasn't even an apartment building. The man was nice and the boy was friendly and my brother's friend was just as nice. This didn't seem right. People surely didn't live this way. I knew that this was not like what we were use to... I've wondered at times if that's not why my brother took me. Town was crowded and even if schools were better it was not good enough. My Mom had decided we had had enough and away we went. Up and out.

Although Dad didn't mind stayin', he knew Mom was right. She really didn't give him much alternative. Come with us or stay here...we're movin'! Mom took some of the money and put it on an apartment. Another apartment! We just left that. I'm sure that's what everyone thought but, Mom knew. It was a modern apartment. There was two stories, two bedrooms, a bathroom, livin' room, dinin' room, kitchen, eight windows and EVEN a walk in closet to play in! We had arrived. Little did we know that behind the apartment buildings there were lots just filled with grass and ball fields and stuff that could overload a down home city kid's mind in a heart-beat.

MIRROR

c. Sept., 1997

There's a mirror that exists, and every time it catches me lookin' there's a disappointment that fills the eyes lookin' back. Have you really seen that? Have you gone there? The skin around your eyes are folded over almost coverin' the pupils as if one day it will not let you see at all. guess if your eyes are doin' that, you're gettin' that way all over. Could it be that the older you get the less you care to look at? I've always heard that what you don't use you'll probably lose. I haven't seen well for most my life so, who knows, I might just not care to see.

There's times when I see more in the dark. I see my family even though they live miles apart. I see people I used to know. I see the places and way we grew up. I can add or delete or mix-up or fast forward or pause...any part of what these sunken eyes have seen through any part of my life or what I've been told about my life. Time is an A-typical thing that just hangs around waitin' for you to become old enough to notice that it really hasn't been waitin' around, it's just growin' like ivy that you can't pull off that wall that's been built all around you. You can't stop that ivy no more'n you could stop a freight train nor your own time of reckonin'. I'm not any older now than when I started all this. I have seen a lot and done a lot and been pleased and let down but especially forgiven. Eyes don't mean a thing when what you've seen hasn't got substance. I'm still

learnin' and still tryin' to help anybody that I can. You know those eyes in the mirror only have the power that looks back at them.

CATFISH RHYME

(c) 1978/1997 Jimmy Wayne Perkins

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG BOY I USED TO GO FISHIN' I SAT ON THE BANKS
ALL DAY LONG
WATCHIN' THE BOBBER JUMPIN' UP AND DOWN WISHIN' I WOULD
CATCH OLD BIG OLD CATFISH TO TAKE HOME

I TOLD MY MAMA NOT TO COOK MY SUPPER
I MIGHT BE HOME A LITTLE TOO LATE
IF I WAS GONE A LITTLE BIT LONGER
GO AHEAD ON TO BED CLOSE YOUR EYES AND GO TO SLEEP

SOMETIMES I'D TIE THE LINE TO MY BELT BUCKLE LAY BACK ON THE
BANK JUST TO REST MY HEAD (AND) IF HE WAS BIG ENOUGH
TO PULL ME IN THE WATER I JUST MIGHT WIND UP THE CATFISH'S
SUPPER INSTEAD

AIN'T THAT THE WAY LIFE IS?
THE HARDER THE FIGHT THE BIGGER THE FISH
THE PRETTIER THE GIRL THE SWEETER THE KISS
THE BRIGHTER THE STAR THE BIGGER THE WISH

ISLAND

c 1997 Jimmy Perkins

Water like turquoise...as far as my eyes could see, made an impression on my mind enough to make me feel the sea would always be with me. Seventeen was an age of no fear and I was in the islands where anything could happen.

Songs at that time didn't lend themselves to notions of sailin' and roamin' the world's oceans. I rowed an old eight foot row boat around the harbor and inlets until my arms were big and strong. I didn't even notice the change in stature. I spent a lot of time on and in the water. It was a natural feelin'.

Snorkelin' came easy and felt common for me although it was a little strange 'cause I could not yet swim. I didn't fear it though. I pulled the rubber strap over my head and pulled the snorkel through the mask band. I would float for hours, effortlessly in the salt water. I never dreamed worried of sharks or barracudas and such 'til I dropped a glove huntin' goosters. The white cotton glove slowly sunk for about five feet then disappeared. The lone Barracuda was just a silver flash when it streaked by to capture the glove. It seems to have been toyin' with me because it brought the glove back. It sank out of sight almost where it had been picked up. Out of the water I came...no more goosters for me that day. Marathon Key was a good place. The beach lay to the left on the far side of the bridge goin' north. Bhia Honda...water and pretty girls and swimmin'. These things sure could keep a young man movin'.

There were yachts and sailboats hidden all in the Keys. We climbed over the fence of one of the private docks. It was there I had sat and held her and let youth just happen. Hueytown, Alabama was her hometown. She liked me and we felt warm together like the sand there at Bhia Honda. I spent all that night til the next mornin' with that girl. I've thanked Hueytown a hundred times. I wasn't given the key to the city but a magnolia did as well. Experience, I learned, was the key and in the Keys is where I gained a lot of experience. Her soft touch and the excitement of darin' taught me somethin' about havin' a new kind of fun. After she left I passed that fine art and lesson on to a young lady down from Pennsylvania visitin' her Sister.

Oh what a time. You never can say too much about the breeze that blows through the palms and the pines and how that breeze lifts away your youth to another place. It's kind of like the oceans mixin' together. The waters are rough and restless when they

mix and afterwards they're both as calm as ever. I drank in all these pleasures then. The kind of drink that would never leave you senseless. I drank some in those times. In the bush there was a place that some great author might have once visited. It was a drinkin' place. It was dark and had a dangerous look. The faded black shutters were all that covered the windows from the outside. There was no air conditioning. Conchs are the only people I knew that could survive in places like that. It was hot as a coke oven and sometimes just as dangerous. You always made sure you kept your mouth shut. You never knew where somebody had just come from or was goin' to. Life is like that. Always do as you can and want, but never take it too far.

Trouble can brew in the best of places and boil over in the worst. I foolishly lived through it all. I ran some and stayed some. Mostly I stayed if there was a good lookin' girl of my age around. I played guitar and sang quite a bit in those times and still do when I want. It makes you feel kind of like somebody else. A talent like that could always get a person in and out of places like the drinkin' place. It was almost like a disguise. You could come or leave when you wanted and you were always welcome back. Leavin' was a little difficult but soon just a memory and always a sweet memory. I worked in New York, New Jersey, D.C., Philadelphia and town after town.

I moved furniture. It was hard and at times down right brutal. Refrigerators, air conditioners, pianos, sofa beds all became dreaded upon sight. I was loadin' furniture in N.Y. Street cleanin' machines drove by sprayin' the curb so the filth would run into the sewers. A huge green parrot repeatedly called me a SOB from his window perch and hookers, junkies, and thieves seemed to be the only people around. Drunks on the street and in the doorways made up most of what I seen. I've watched people walk away with furniture even while you were tryin' to load it. These could end up in some very heated conflicts. Especially if the other party was unwillin' to drop what they just stole. It was such a crazy place.

D.C. was the "Black Hole" of the coast. The East is so nervous! I knew there was a place waitin' for me that I had not yet discovered and I was on my way there. Stoppin' off in Spokane I realized the weather was goin' to be great. It was arid, like the desert. I learned that "Sun Lake" and "Grand Coulee Dam" were great places for wild young men to run and drink and find pretty girls. Unlike the East it was calm and relaxed, almost a dream. Me and Dale and Bishy Billop and Pat Bigger jumped off bluffs twenty or thirty feet high. I still couldn't swim but, who cared? This was one of those private dock things and I wasn't goin' to miss it. I sunk so deep in the cold lake water I felt like I would just keep sinkin' but, still I rose to the surface. Young girls, eighteen and nineteen, just like us, swimmin' and lookin' and feelin' life inside and out, were right there with us. I could remember names if I sat and thought long enough.

A tent and cool desert air and playin' you often noticed in young animals, was a common denominator to enjoyment. CSN, The Beatles, and Creedence were big stuff then but durin' that time nobody cared if Elvis himself had just messed his pants in public. We were livin' the high life surrounded by great friends, great times, drink and pretty females. A young man's dream in a young man's world. As in all things the time to leave rolled around. I knew if you stayed somewhere long enough, you'd stay forever. Stayin' means restrictions and restrictions were the last thing I needed at that time. I waved good-bye to Dale, Pat, Bishy (Billy) and the girls, then left never to see them again. Via Denver, which kept me awhile, I made my way home.

Mom and Dad both knew I was leavin' again...somethin' about automatically turnin' two or three years younger when you go home. Home is home and gone is gone so that's where time put me. South, far south, as far south as you could go in the U.S. Key Largo, Big Pine, Marathon, Boca Chico, Stock Island to Harvelle's Trailer Court and Key West. At that time the new age people had not yet taken over the Keys and the island life was inches from bein' wild. Key West was only two miles by three miles and brown skinned girls were everywhere. Most all were taken but if you were smooth enough or tough enough, or both, one of the locals was yours. It could be though that a Cuban or Puerto Rican might want to stop you. The drive-in was the place on a hot evenin' just before midnight.

I won't forget her name. Darin' is the best word in describin' her. Her Dad was a sailor and nobody cared when she came and went. She was nineteen and in the days of the late 60's that meant everything. Sixty four Oldsmobiles with huge seats and big

engines were great rides with great potential for fast girls and wild boys. Fast and comfortable was the trend and trim was in. There were many nights at the drive-in at Key West that I shall always remember. I fished for sharks and goosters and girls and ran through the Keys any way I wanted to. A young man can have fun and learn and grow and remember fun times forever. They always float around waitin' to be caught and connected to a feelin'. A consolation of great proportion that can heal and mend and brighten and make you smile anytime any place. Fun is the word, how you live it is the definition. I remember these still.

The time for "the Big Trip" was here.

MOCKINGBIRD

c. 1997 Jimmy Perkins

Sometimes late at night when the moon is barely shinin' and the wind is little more than a breeze a Mockingbird calls. First one call then a whistle, even a shrill screech that he's heard durin' his travels through the darkness. You know the saying, "If a Mockinbird comes and stays somebody will soon depart this world". I've sat and watched it happen and still didn't believe it. I've seen it twice now in my lifetime. A person sometimes doesn't understand the mysterious strangeness of happenings around them until it crawls right up on 'em and looks them in the eye.

THE BIG ROCK

The "Big Rock" overlooked the house where I was born. It was named so because it was just a giant rock that stuck out of the side of the ridge. It was right on top of the ridge. I hung off it upside down once. It was a sight and you could see a sight if you had the notion. The house where I was born is still there. It's called Forest Street now and is covered by pavement. That keeps the mud and dust away and makes the road a quicker trip away than it use to be. The players are now gone 'cept Mom. I never knew Mammy, my grandmother, nor any of my grand parents. On up the ridge in Sunshine is where my brothers was born. Sis was born almost to the foot of the mountain towards town on a small ridge that run straight down from the Big Rock, right next to the tracks. Mom was born on Leven Hill, properly named Eleventh Street. That house is still there.

Dad was born up on Peabody Mountain close to Westburn and Duff, in a company house next to the mine. There was three houses there. I think Dad didn't know his real birthday but, it was said to be September 3, and was sworn to be by three people fore he got his birth certificate.

COUNTENANCE

I don't much reckon it matters when you're born or die. If you do as you can or should, that's what makes for a life. Any direction away from that is a minor trip and forgiveness was made just for that purpose. My family never done much but survive. They been here from the beginnin' and lived and died, good and bad, and still survive.

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