

# *Pickle*

Thomas A. Carothers  
The Literary Club  
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Powhatan Indians attacked James Cittie County and massacred 347 colonists in 1622. John Cooke was among the survivors. After a twelve-week voyage from London, the brigantine, *Lyon*, anchored in Boston Harbor, Massachusetts Bay Colony on September 16, 1632, with one hundred twenty-three Puritans aboard. Among them was Richard Olmsted, who settled with his family in New Town, Braintree Colony. He subsequently fought in the Pequot and King Philip's Wars, was one of a company of men that settled Norwalk, Connecticut, and is memorialized on the Founders Stone in Hartford. Edward Booker emigrated from England via Holland sometime between 1638 and 1648 to settle in Gloucester County, Virginia Colony. James Carruthers emigrated from Scotland, settled in Pennsylvania, registered for military service in 1756, and participated in Lieutenant Colonel John Armstrong's retaliatory raid on a village of Delaware Indians in western Pennsylvania in the French and Indian Wars. Cooke, Olmsted, Booker, and Carruthers families all had heraldic coats of arms.

With such august lineage, was it any wonder that my infancy should have been graced with an engraved silver spoon? Did I understand the gravity of such a heraldic totem? Or subsequently, was the discrepancy between that noble heritage and the lowliness of my first abode, the lowest drawer in a chest of drawers in the Brierhurst Hotel in Philadelphia, an insult to my developing sense of standing? I expect at that point in my life I probably gave it no thought. Two years later, however, as I inched toward a more mature social awareness, I am certain that I considered the lower unit of a duplex on Cleinview Avenue in Cincinnati to be more suitable to one of my station, especially since a young lawyer and his family occupied the upper unit. Did that unearned spoon goad me to venture forth into the greater world to achieve a triumph that would have merited such a trophy as had been the practice of aspiring Roman generals two millennia before? It's hard to say, but my first unaccompanied foray most certainly warranted consideration.

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It was just me sitting in the back seat appropriately attired for the conquest in my toddler t-shirt and shorts; it was dark outside; and voices crackling on and off over a radio were almost certainly recounting my exploits of survival in such an arduous and dangerous trek past a spooky looming Addams family house, big kids, barking dogs, and 1940's cars lumbering by like mechanized triceratopses and brontosaurus. The dome light came on briefly, then extinguished as the front door was opened and closed. I patiently waited in the darkness. A flashlight beam scanned the back seat, then found and focused on my triumphal visage.

"Ma'am, is this your little boy? He was found wandering several streets down from here."

We were still living on Cleinview. It was drizzling. I went outside in my rain slicker and boots to walk up the street to play with a neighborhood friend, which I was now allowed to do. As I walked toward the sidewalk, I spied it. Neatly wrapped in soggy waxed paper was a big, plump pickle. I looked around. There was nobody. Just think of it... a pickle. I picked it up and looked around again. Nobody. Finders keepers, but I knew that I needed approval.

"No... you don't know where that pickle came from or who touched it," said my mother.

Mom used to tell me about her family trips as a child from Pennsylvania to visit grandparents, aunts, uncles, and a passel of cousins in Henry County, Virginia. She said that each morning great grandfather Booker used to hobble onto the front porch, settle into his rocker, sip a bourbon toddy, and survey the gently rolling terrain of his farm. Shopping trips into Martinsville were highlighted by a sprinkling of wizened Confederate veterans sitting on park benches chewin' and spittin' tobacco, and talkin' lazily about bygone times of comradery, daring, and peril. Nothing was ever said about the Booker family participation during the War Between the States nor was any mention made of

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slaveholding. Perhaps it just didn't do any good talking of such things around my grandfather's Yankee bride.

Many, many years later one evening, after I had imbibed a little too much, an electrical discharge between nerve cells misfired throwing off a spark that streaked through the depths of my brain. A long-buried memory was struck, setting off an uncontrolled chain reaction which detonated an emotional meltdown that overwhelmed my otherwise pleasantly altered consciousness. I sobbed almost uncontrollably as I recounted an earlier era in my life and spoke of Andrew.

I had no idea why we moved to Tennessee. I imagine that when we returned from my grandparents' cottage on Cape Cod at the end of the summer to a different place, I probably just considered it to be the natural course of things. After all, how expansive could a five-year-old's reference point be? I have no memory of what my first impression was or even if I had one since I was probably numbed by endless hours trapped in the back seat of a car threading its way through one stoplight towns, road construction, traffic jams, and detours for 1400 miles on two-lane roads. Even if I wasn't numb, I probably wasn't tall enough to peer over the sill of the car door window as it drove south from Memphis on Rural Route 12. Over the next three years whether returning on a school bus or in the family navy blue 1949 Plymouth station wagon, I came to feel a sense of anticipation and calm as we passed on the left a small run-down, rough-hewn slatwall shack with a tin roof and a drunken full-length covered porch straining to support a large red Coca Cola cooler. Just a quarter mile down the road on the right were a post box and the gravel driveway that led to our house.

The driveway immediately dove into woods and then snaked its way past a small lake on the right, a large field on the left, through more woods, past a small run-down barn with an adjacent stand

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of corn on the left, and then up a slight rise past a brick wall, to end at a carport on the back of a white one-story house. On one side of the house were gently rolling wooded hills sloping downward toward the two-acre man-made lake. On the other side was a brick patio and a large grassy area bounded by the brick wall alongside the driveway and an identical brick wall on the opposite side. Looking out from the patio to the right were a small stand of trees with a hammock and picnic table; ahead and slightly to the right was a rundown once formal garden; straight ahead was a tall thick tangle of honeysuckle; and on the other side of the honeysuckle was a small dirt foot path that passed between it and the brick wall adjacent to the driveway.

The path opened into a yard of hard-packed dirt that was bounded by the honeysuckle thicket and a barbed wire fence on two sides. At the far end of the yard on the other side of the fence was a large pasture with grazing cows and to the left the ground sloped down to the cornfield and barn. The fourth side of the yard was bordered by a small white clapboard house that sat on blocks of stone or brick so that you could look under it all the way to the other side. There were two rickety wooden steps leading up to the front door, and on entering one was in a room, perhaps 10' x 10', with a wood burning stove up against the back wall. To the right was a small table and two chairs and a window that overlooked the cornfield. On the front wall to the right of the door was a threadbare faded couch and to the left was a doorway to a smaller room that had a three-quarter wrought iron bed with a saggy, thin, well-worn mattress, a small chest of drawers and a mirror on the back wall, a small stand with a large white ceramic bowl, and another white ceramic bowl on the floor. I don't remember whether there was a bathroom and probably never asked, maybe because I was never there long enough to have to use one. The whole place smelled of burnt wood and bacon fat. That's where Andrew and Mary lived. Andrew was tall, lean, and muscular and usually wore a long sleeve shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a

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heavy pair of work pants held up by suspenders, and work boots. Mary was shorter and much darker in complexion, and she always wore a maid's uniform with an apron. Mary cooked and cleaned house for us. Andrew did odd jobs around the property and planted corn, cotton, peanuts, and watermelon. I didn't know where they came from- they were just there. Maybe they came with the main house.

Andrew Boykin married Mary Forster on September 14, 1948, in Memphis, Tennessee. The Boykins arrived in the Maryland and Virginia colonies in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Solomon Boykin was born in Isle of Wight County, Virginia Colony in 1720 and died in St. George Parrish, Georgia in 1770. Solomon Boykin Jr. was born in Isle of Wight County in May 1742 and died on December 8, 1821, in Clarke County, Alabama. His third son, John Boykin, was born on April 11, 1800, in Burke County, Georgia and died in 1880 in Smith County, Mississippi. John had a son, James William Boykin, who was born July 26, 1824, in Smith County, Mississippi and died in 1864 in Newton County, Mississippi. James William reportedly owned a slave named Henry. Thomas Forster died in Port Royal, Jamaica in 1692.

After breakfast on non-school days, I used to walk down to Andrew and Mary's house in the morning to see what Andrew might be doing. Mary was usually straightening things up which didn't interest me. My curiosity in her I goings on was only piqued by what she might be baking up at the main house, especially if it was lemon meringue pie. Andrew and I usually went through a gate in the fence and walked down a little dirt path to the barn. On the back side of the barn there was small muddy area that abutted the barn and was bordered on the other three sides by a rough board fence. Nelliebelle, an old swayback draft horse, lived in the barn; Suzie the pig hung out in the pigsty; and a gang of chickens constantly roamed the barnyard, nagging the ground with incessant pecking. In addition to the farm animals, we also had a black Giant Schnauzer named Sini.

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The first thing Andrew did when we got to the barn was to pat Nelliebelle on the rump and to check the trough to see there was enough water. Then he went over to a large burlap bag sitting in the corner, scooped out some oats to put into a feed bag that was hanging on the back wall and returned to slip it over the horse's muzzle and buckle the strap behind her ears. After that, he went to a wooden bin, scooped up a handful of corn, walked back into the barnyard, and scattered the corn over the ground, which stirred up a frenetic frenzy of pecking by the hens while the rooster surveyed his harem from a spot on high. Finally, Andrew went back into the barn to mix up a bucket of slop which usually consisted of leftover food scraps, oats, and water, walked around the corner of the barn, and dumped the slop into a trough. Suzie on hearing that melodious slosh, turned from whatever she had been rooting for in the mud, squealed, and trotted over. She usually squealed again, lowered her snout, and grunted, snorted, and slurped with wild abandon until she had emptied the trough. Meanwhile Andrew tended to odds and ends around the farm and then went over to the main house to ask mom if there was anything that needed doin'.

In the early spring, after Nelliebelle finished her oats, Andrew threw a bridle over her head, put the bit in her mouth, and buckled the bridle under her jaw. Then he backed her out of the stall, led her to the pigsty, and threw the reins a couple of turns around the upper board of the fence. He went back into the barn, came out with a heavy padded collar, unwrapped the reins, and passed the collar over Nelliebelle's head and down her neck until it was seated on her shoulders. Then he led her to the cornfield where he had left the plow the day before. While holding onto the reins, he connected the plow to the horse by placing the heavy metal rings at the end of thick leather straps from the plow over curved metal prongs sticking out from the collar. Finally, he threw the reins, which were configured as

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one long loop, over one shoulder and under the other arm, grabbed the handles of the plow, clucked his tongue, and said firmly, "C'mon, Nelliebelle."

After a short pause, the old horse shook her head as if to say no, put it down in resignation, and started plodding. With both hands on the plow, Andrew wrestled to keep it from tilting too far to one side or the other so that a dark brown furrow was carved straight as an arrow to the end of the field. At the end of each row Andrew commanded the horse to stop, pulled hard on one of the reins, clucked his tongue, and said either "gee" or "haw" to command her to make a hard turn to the right or left to begin the next furrow. Since controlling the plow required considerable strength, Andrew only let me walk alongside. If I happened to walk too far ahead, Nelliebelle would turn her head so the blinders no longer blocked her view to check me out, which usually caused her to veer off course. It normally took Andrew three to four days to plow the field, up to five with me helping.

One morning not too long after the cornfield had been plowed, I went down to Andrew and Mary's house after breakfast, stepped up to the front door, and knocked.

"C'mon in." Andrew was sitting at the table, sipping a cup of deep, black coffee. Mary was in the other room straightening things up.

"I'm goin' to plant corn. Do you want to help?"

I nodded. He finished his coffee, put the cup in a big pot of steaming water sitting on top of the stove, and the two of us went outdoors, through the gate, and down the path to the barn. Andrew went through his usual early morning routine of feeding Nelliebelle, Suzie, and the hens. He then walked back into the barn with me trailing along, grabbed a large droopy burlap bag with a strap, scooped corn kernels from the bin into the bag, put the bag under his right armpit, and threw the strap of the bag

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over his left shoulder. We walked over to the first furrow. He bent over, dug a small hole with one hand, reached into the sack with the other, scooped up a handful of corn, and dumped several kernels into the hole. He swept dirt with his other hand to cover the hole and its contents, stood up and walked another two feet to repeat the process. After several holes had been dug, filled, and covered, he said, "Now you try."

He helped me dig the first couple of holes, put some kernels in my hand to show me how much to get, let me put the corn in the hole, and then guided my hand in a sweeping motion to push loose dirt to back fill the hole. He let me do everything for a while except carry the burlap bag. It was too big for me. When the sun started to get hot, my six-year-old attention span faltered and began wandering. Andrew knew it was time for a shift change.

"Tommy, you go on now, I'll finish up."

"OK, Andrew." I turned around and walked up the driveway to the house, while he continued to take a few steps, bend over, reach in the bag, drop in some corn, cover the hole, and move on.

Later in the spring, Andrew used to hoist me onto Nelliebelle's back and lead her down the driveway through the woods. When we arrived at the field, Andrew lifted me off, and he and I walked through rows and rows of cotton plants to see how the crop was comin' along. Then we walked over to a corner of the field where there were rows of small green plants hugging the ground. He bent over and pulled one up, roots and all, to check on the peanuts. After restoring the little guy back to its place, we walked to the opposite corner for the final inspection, the best one of all because it offered the promise of instant gratification. As we stood amongst a patch of plump watermelons languidly wallowing on the ground, he took out his pocketknife, drove it into the most likely suspect and cut out a chunk for me to

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taste. There was just nothing better than standing in a watermelon patch early in the morning biting into a chunk of cool sweet watermelon and spitting out seeds wherever you wanted.

On sunny spring days when it wasn't too hot, and there were no chores to do around the barn, the fields, or the main house, Andrew grabbed a couple of cane poles, and he and I walked down to the lake to go fishing. I don't remember whether we talked much while we sat on the bank waiting for our bobbers to start jiggling, which almost never happened. Sometimes we caught fish but more often caught big old snapping turtles, which Andrew had to free from the hook because he knew how to release them without losing a finger (he had all his fingers).

Occasionally, Andrew used to take me along on shopping trips. We strode down the driveway frequently having to stop to let one or two or three or more black racers slither across. When we reached route 12, we turned to the left and walked up the road to the little shack with the drunken porch. We stepped onto the porch, and Andrew opened a rickety screen door with a worn tin banner covering the middle rail which proclaimed that Wonder Bread "Helps Build Strong Bodies 8 Ways". He cautiously approached the counter where an old white woman with stringy grey black hair in a faded floral print dress stood.

"Y'all want a tin of Copenhagen?" she asked.

"Yes'm," replied Andrew. I knew he was buying it for Mary because her lower lip always had a slight bulge and, whenever she spoke, she never seemed to open her mouth very much.

"An' I also need a can of lard," he added. While this transaction was playing out, I scouted out Hostess Cupcakes, Twinkies, and Sno Balls on one shelf and Dad's Root Beer Barrels, Mary Janes, and Bazooka bubble gum in glass cannisters on the counter, just hoping... but we never bought any of that.

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Some days when I returned from school, Andrew wasn't around, and so I had to fend for myself since I was too young to do any meaningful chores other than putting my toys back in the toy chest. Fortunately, I was in the vanguard of the television generation due in no small part to my erudite kindergarten dissertation presented one afternoon to Dad about a radio that showed pictures. So, after lunch I pulled up in front of a dark wood cabinet sitting on legs with two doors that swung open to reveal a small square screen with rounded corners and two knobs below. Turning the right knob wasn't necessary since there was fuzz on every number other than 5, and so I only had to turn the knob on the left. By the time the vacuum tubes in the back warmed up and grainy black and white apparitions materialized on the screen, I was ready for adventure! I usually watched shows about cowboys like the Lone Ranger, the Cisco Kid, or Wild Bill Hickok. TV in those days was much better than today's screen time because I learned useful stuff like how to ride a horse and handle a six-gun.

After Kate Smith finished singing *God Bless America*, which she seemed to do every afternoon, I used to confidently stride over to the toy chest in my room to get my cowboy hat, put on a bandana, strap on my holster and six-gun, grab my cardboard horse, and go outside. I spread apart the two halves of the horse, stepped in between them, threw two string loops from the horse over my shoulders, made a whinnying sound, shouted "Hi yo, Silver" or "Giddyup, Diablo", depending on which show I had watched, and galloped off in a cloud of dust to ride patrol around the perimeter of the back yard to fight for truth, justice, and the American way. When my little brother, Cole, who was three years younger was able to keep up, he rode along as my sidekick. At the height of spring, when the honeysuckle was in full bloom, we often pulled up to the edge of the thicket after a long ride and led our cardboard horses deep into the maze of trunks and vines to tie them up so that we wouldn't be discovered by any bad hombres looking to drag us back to the house for a bath. Then we clambered up into a springy bed of

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thick fragrant honeysuckle vines, lied down, and looked up at the sky to watch big fluffy cumulus horses, Indians, buffaloes, and stagecoaches lazily float by way, way overhead.

Friday nights, Mom and Dad usually went out, and it was just Andrew and me. Mary usually left the main house after cleaning up the dinner dishes; Cole was put to bed early; and Andrew came up to watch television. He turned down all the lights so that the picture was better and tuned in to Friday night at the fights on the Gillette Cavalcade of Sports. I remember names of some of the boxers such as Sugar Ray Robinson, Rocky Marciano, Archie Moore, Carmen Basilio, and Jersey Joe Walcott, probably because they were on more often. As each fight went into later rounds, Andrew's mutters to "watch for his left jab, now follow with your right, c'mon now" gave way to a more determined teeth clenching "hit him with the left hook... that's right now... throw in some body punches... OK now hit him with an upper cut... follow with a quick jab... get off the ropes, get up get up!" I was never quite sure who he was rooting for. Did he always root for the colored boxer, or, if there wasn't one, did he root for the boxer from New Jersey or the one from New York, or from the Bronx, or Philadelphia (places where they all seemed to come from)? The fights went long into the night, well past my bedtime, and after one or two fights, my eyelids, though not bruised or swollen, got too heavy for my eyes to follow the circling boxers as they bobbed and parried. A clinch of two exhausted sweaty fighters just barely holding each other up was my cue that the fights were over. Like the referee in the ring, Andrew eased the punch-drunk kid out of his corner, declared the night over, and tucked him in.

I went to two schools while we lived in Tennessee: Joyland Kindergarten and Whitehaven Elementary School. One day at Whitehaven Elementary, the entire class formed up behind our teacher and then followed her outside. As we walked along on the sidewalk a kid next to me said, "If you step on a crack, your mother turns black." I assiduously avoided stepping on cracks... at least for a while, but I

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either became distracted or tired of taking extra big steps and ended up stepping on one crack and then another. I don't remember whether I reported the next day that the findings didn't support the theorem or whether I figured out that it was just one of those sayings. In my Joyland Kindergarten graduation picture there were forty-three freshly scrubbed cherubic white children in white caps and gowns. In a class picture of either the first or second grade there were 34 white girls and boys. I never questioned where the colored children went to school. I don't think I ever asked Andrew what his childhood was like. I don't think that I ever thought to ask. That was just the way things were.

Sometime during the spring of second grade, Mom informed me that we would be moving to Cincinnati, a city up north.

"But I don't want to move to a city, I'm a country boy," I protested.

Nothing much was said after that. Cole and I continued to ride patrol; watermelons were getting bigger; cotton was ready for picking. I never saw Andrew harvest his crops, but Cole said that one time he saw a whole bunch of colored people with big burlap bags slung over their shoulders bending over to pick cotton. Cole thought that they must have been Andrew's friends. I didn't know that Andrew had any friends because I never saw anyone other than myself or Cole visit him and Mary.

Perhaps an unbearably hot and humid day in late spring of 1954 helped bring about a 1950's equivalent of closure to Tennessee. All windows closed, seatbacks sticky, partially digested lunch contents gently floating in little puddles of gastric juices began to swirl as the school bus floated over hill tops, dropped into valleys, plowed its way to the hilltops, and plunged into the valleys. As the yellow galleon rolled into right turns, righted itself and dipped into left turns, swirls mounted into swells. As hot sweaty little bodies lurched forward with screeching stops and snapped back with jolting starts, swells

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erupted into whitecaps. Hot and sweaty turned into nauseatingly fetid; a scream erupted from the rear; and kids like popcorn sprang from one seat to another or hopped across the aisle as a frothy tsunami of curdled milk, peanut butter and Wonder bread fragments, Twinkie cream filling clots, and stuff unrecognizable roiled around the bus floor. Brakes screeched; the bus door hissed as if blown open by some monstrous belch, and I was disgorged hot and sweaty but uncontaminated.

A languid stroll up the driveway through the coolness of the woods lulled me into carefree complacency. I went into the kitchen, emptied my thermos, and grabbed some leftover carrots to take down to Suzie. Feeding Suzie leftovers was great sport. Whenever she saw me coming, her little tail would stand up, she would squeal, trot over to the trough, look up at me with her beady eyes, and start exploring with her snout for the treat she knew I was bringing. But this time she didn't come. I walked down one side of the fence and up the other looking everywhere for her. She wasn't in the corners; she wasn't sunk in the mud puddle in the middle; she wasn't there. I ran up to Andrew and Mary's house. Andrew was at the stove cooking up some bacon.

"She isn't here anymore, Tommy."

Cincinnati was very different from rural Tennessee: the house on Madison Road was much bigger and stood three stories tall. The front half of the house was the formal presentable half. Cole and I were relegated to the back, and Andrew and Mary were assigned a small bedroom with minimal furnishings on the third floor. The yard abutted Madison Lane on which two families with children approximately our ages lived. So, I no longer had to scale a tall brick wall and walk across a large pasture with grazing horses to visit Martha, the only child who lived within miles of us in Tennessee. I no longer had to walk down a long gravel driveway to get the school bus. In Cincinnati, I either just climbed

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into Mom's station wagon or stepped through the side yard gate to wait for the neighborhood carpool to pick me up on Madison Lane. The route to school was level, and the final destination was the only stop either way. Riding a bike was much easier on paved Cincinnati streets than it had been on the rough, uneven backyard in Tennessee. Sini filled in quite nicely for Suzie, rushing up to lick my face each day on returning from school. Andrew did yardwork, took out the garbage and did other chores around the house. Mary continued to clean house and cook. Everyone settled into their new routines. Everything would be just fine, and in a lot of ways better.

One day sometime in early spring, planting season down in Tennessee, Andrew stopped raking, put the rake up against the side of the garage and went over to a low fieldstone curb that lined the driveway and motioned for me to come sit down by him.

"Sit down Tommy, I want to talk to you"

"OK, Andrew."

"You remember the farm back in Tennessee"

"Yes."

"Do you miss it?"

"I do some... not so much." I really liked my new school and friends. We had a bigger TV, and there were better shows like the Buster Brown Show, Howdie Doodie, Sky King, Roy Rogers, and cartoons every Saturday morning. There were streets where I was able to ride my bike. Why I was even able to ride down to Hyde Park Square and cruise one or both 5&10 stores.

"Well, I do. Tommy, things just don't seem to be working out up heah."

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“Oh, Andrew, everything will be OK.”

He didn't respond and just kept whittling a piece of wood he had picked up. A few days later, when I got home from school, Mom said, “Tommy, I have something to tell you... Andrew's gone.”

I couldn't believe it. So that's what Andrew was talking about. I don't remember exactly what my feelings were, but I was sure that I was going to miss him. And I did... but after a few weeks, everything returned to normal. I continued to go to school; my brother and I watched TV every Saturday morning; and Mary kept on cooking. But one day, Sini didn't come out to greet me.

“Where's Sini?” I asked.

“She got hit by a car, and is down in the basement,” Mom replied.

Dad had amputated Sini's left hind leg. She was able to hop around pretty well, and so I expected things to get back to normal, but about two weeks later she died from an infection. That was a sad day, we all loved Sini. But, with time, things returned to normal; slowly Sini began to fade from my consciousness; and we did get another dog.

I don't remember how long it had been since Andrew left us, but Mom told me one day that she had to let Mary go because she had been drinking. After that, the third-floor apartment became a sort of flop house for one colored couple after another: George and Sarah- George drank too much; Louise and William- Louise became too insolent; Robert and Mazie- Mazie was a terrible cook; and so on and so on. One afternoon, while Cole and I were playing in the back yard, someone in a long black coat walked up the driveway and stopped about fifteen feet away.

“Hello, Tommy. How y'all doin'?”

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“Oh fine, Mary.”

There was an awkward silence as Mary stood there looking at us.

“Just tell your mother that I came by,” said Mary and she turned around and left.

“Had she been drinking, Tommy?”

“I dunno, I guess so.”

Sometime afterward a letter arrived, addressed to Mr. Tommy Carothers, 2347 Madison Rd, Cincinnati 8, Ohio. The return address was A. Boykin, General Delivery, Memphis, Tenn. The letter was written on two small pieces of paper in pencil and said “Dear Tommy, Since I left, I have been on hard times. I have a bad leg and can’t find no work. I don’t reckon your mother would want to have me back. Could you possibly send me a little money to help me get by until my leg gets better? I hope you are well. Andrew.” I had a toy Mosler safe, and in it were twelve dollars and eighty-four cents. I wanted to help Andrew. I missed him.

“Mom, Andrew has a bad leg and can’t work. He asked if I could send him some money to help him get by.” I showed her the letter.

“Tommy, you know he left us, don’t you?”, she responded with a disapproving look.

I really wanted to help him, but he did leave us. The money I could send him would help, but it wasn’t very much. Would he write to ask for more? Would Mom and Dad send money? Would Andrew even get it? Over the next few days this dialogue rattled around in my head. Should I send him the money? He did leave us. Mary was let go for drinking. Was Andrew drinking? I didn’t have that much money to send him... it probably wouldn’t have lasted that long... it might not get to him even if I did

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send it. The weekend arrived, and I was excited about going over to a friend's house for the night. The next week, school routine resumed. Maybe, I shouldn't send him money. There was a really neat Tinker Toy armored personnel carrier that I wanted to get. But Andrew was on hard times. He left us... gradually, gradually, the plea for help faded away, far away smothered by doubt, selfishness, betrayal, and distance. I never responded.

Many, many years later my mother's second marriage package to Wes included fine art, expensive German automobiles, gourmet dining, annual jaunts to Provence, and a maid, Mary Ewing. Whenever I happened to stop by their house in the morning and entered through the kitchen, I would invariably encounter Mary enjoying a large leisurely breakfast of eggs, bacon, toast, orange juice, and coffee that she had just fixed for herself. I always thought she was lazy. I didn't know but suspected that she wasn't paid much. She took the bus everywhere, even up to Xenia, Ohio to visit her family for the holidays. She lived a very simple life: that's all I knew. Through tragic losses, stormy years of Wes' failing health, and his death Mary continued to fix her breakfast and take the bus. Cole thought that over time she had even become something of a confidante to our mother. After mom's death, Mary moved into a small two room apartment in senior citizens' housing. She loved her tiny new apartment, said it was "real nice." I saw the apartment once, when I took a large screen TV that we no longer used to replace her old set which had broken. She was so grateful. She was always grateful.

John Ewing emigrated from Carnashannagh, county Donegal to Chester County, Pennsylvania Colony where he died in in 1745. His son William moved to Virginia Colony in 1737.

Mary used to call me from time to time for medical advice. I hadn't heard from her for quite a while and wondered if she might have passed away. There could still be some value in an annuity we

# *Pickle*

Thomas A. Carothers  
The Literary Club  
January 10, 2022

had bought for her. I needed to give her a call, but my brother called me first. The obituary indicated that Mary's funeral was to be held the following week at the Craver-Riggs Funeral Home in Milford and that she had a middle name, Elizabeth. I never knew that. At the funeral service I learned that she attended a small African Methodist Episcopal Church in Milford. So, she probably lived in Milford. The minister recounted how simple Mary's life had been. Nobody paid her any attention. She was a nobody. She went to church every Sunday. She especially made sure each child in Sunday school had a Bible, and, if not, she brought one the next week. When she was no longer able to attend church, she was honored by the congregation with the title "Mother of the Church". The pastor said she was so overjoyed by her new honorific that she absolutely beamed whenever he happened to visit her. As he recounted the simplicity of her life, an almost child-like simplicity, an electrical discharge between nerve cells misfired throwing off a spark that streaked through the depths of my brain. A long-buried memory was struck, setting off an uncontrolled chain reaction which detonated an emotional meltdown that overwhelmed my saddened but otherwise unaltered consciousness. I sobbed almost uncontrollably as I recounted a moment earlier in my life.

"No... you don't know where that pickle came from or who touched it," said my mother. She took the pickle and threw it into the trash can.