

First Funeral—Donnie Ayers

By Sarah Clayton

The air in the Valley of Virginia becomes thick and still mid-summer. With the cicadas in full cry, the world throbs beneath a blanket of heat. The creeks slow, gardens wither, cows move lethargically, swatting their muck-encrusted tails at the squadrons of flies that for a moment, drift away, only to resettle once the tail moves on. The flies gather, too, in the moist, cool nostrils and damp corners of the eyes of these insect-harried beasts – black Angus, brown and white Hereford, and the white Charolais – that are the backbone of the farming industry in our county and outnumber the human population—29,000 cattle in 2021 versus 22,357 people in 2020.

In the distance comes the chu-chu-chunk of the baler, scooping the cut and raked hay into its maw, and pushing neatly-strung, 45-pound bales out behind—called square bales despite their being obviously rectangular. Men and boys—often a 10-year-old is driving the tractor--stripped to the waist and wet with sweat, glisten as they swing the bales rhythmically up and onto the wooden wagon. It's like a Dr. Seuss parade—tractor, baler, wagon, old and worn and faded, parts of it held together with baling twine—moving in stately procession through the field, the mountains beyond a hazy blue in the shimmering heat.

Often I'd be out there with them, either with a pitcher of ice tea or stacking bales on the wagon until the wall of hot, prickly grass got too high and all 65 pounds of 10-year-old me, simply couldn't heft them aloft. Then I'd return home and make cookies for later,

when the sun had set, and the men could no longer see to work. They'd come in, the unspoken prayer, hanging in the air, for the rains to hold off until they could get the last of the hay put up.

This was my baking era. Can't remember what possessed me, but I made yeast-risen bread and rolls and cookies almost on a daily basis though, to this day, I have no memory of ever making cookies for my sons. It was an era that came and went in the 10th year of my life.

This particular day—July 4, 1962—I was making ice cream sandwiches from the Betty Crocker cookbook I'd earned saving cereal box tops. "Sarah Wynnette Mary Clayton, 10 years old," sprawled in my loopy, soon to be fifth-grade handwriting across the title page. I was making the cake part of the sandwiches and, for the first time in my life, using sticky, pungent, inky-black molasses as an ingredient. We didn't use molasses much in our house, though it was made on many farms in the county, and still is on a few in a fall ritual of putting by the cooked down sorghum cane juice to coat the pancakes and biscuits of winter.

I don't know where the rest of my family was, though Philip was probably in the hay field. I was alone in the kitchen with our wood cook stove tucked into the massive fireplace, and saw our neighbor, Clifford Hall, whose family's roots run at least five generations deep in Kerrs Creek on this north side of House Mountain, coming slowly up the steep, tree-studded hill of our yard. He was older than I by four years, tall and thin, but we all played together – softball in the spring and summer fields with cow pie

bases, cards in the winter before our library fire, or amidst the clamor of his large family, downing his mother's homemade grape juice, best in the county.

Watching Clifford making his way up the hill, I stood, stirring the cookie dough with a wooden spoon that made a flabby, slapping sound against the batter.

Clifford knocked on the door, and I called him in. Behind his glasses, his eyes were somber in a way I'd never seen them – and Clifford was a serious young man, not given to light banter.

“Donnie Ayers died,” he said. “Accidentally shot himself.”

I clutched the bowl to my chest, the swirling dough swilling to a halt, the spoon, suspended, dripping back its contents, the smell of molasses suffocating. In my head was Donnie alive, my friend, my partner in so many of the games my brother and I played with him and his twin brother Ronnie. I had a crush on Donnie. Unlike Ronnie, who was mischievous and energetic, Donnie was slower-moving, gentle and kind, especially to me who was half the size of the boys I tried to keep up with as we played hockey on the farm ponds (no one had skates or real hockey sticks but you couldn't tell us we weren't having a fine old time chasing a bit of frozen cow pie around the ice with twiggy branches); war in the old quarry, our stick-weed swords clashing, osage oranges hurled as cannon balls at each other's forts; filling buckets with blackberries to take back to our mothers for pies and jams.

Donnie. My friend. Dead. At ten years old I simply didn't know what to do with this information. No one I knew had ever died. I stood speechless in the kitchen, the stove

heating up to cooking temperature, the smell of molasses overwhelming me, the chu-chu-chunk of the baler unchecked in the distance. Numb.

Several days later, holding my mother's hand, we walked up the front steps of the Kerrs Creek Baptist Church that had been here since 1863 on land donated by Clifford's great uncles, Richard (1840-1919), and William Miller (1848-1922), two bachelor brothers who lived down the road about a quarter mile. Big House Mountain guards it to the rear and, not far from its front door, runs Kerrs Creek where Ronnie and Donnie, Philip and I fished, swam, and sat on its banks, eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on those final days of summer when the hay was in and school still out.

Mother and I entered the church and, again, a numbness took hold of me. I'd only ever been in the Catholic church. The nuns told me it was a mortal sin to go anywhere else and I, in that era of life when the proclamation of an adult was the word and the word was God, believed with all my heart and soul that this was the gospel truth. And yet, here, in this church, was my friend. My beloved Donnie. Dead. Surely, me being here couldn't be a sin. It was my first crisis of faith.

The church was packed. I felt the people milling around me like cattle in a feedlot, though my eyes were riveted to the front of the church where a coffin was parked, the first I'd ever seen. I could just make out Donnie's head in profile. He's sleeping, I thought, knowing it was impossible, but simply incapable of understanding the greater implications of what I was seeing. Chickens died under the blow of an axe. Cattle were sent to the slaughterhouse. Tadpoles, left too long in a jar, stopped moving. But Donnie? We'd been picking blackberries up on the bluff just last week.

Then the choir began: “When the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be there,” filling the church with sound thick with emotion. People shuffled around, finding seats, fanned themselves and, though the tears rolled, the church, except for the music, was silent: “When the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be there.” In my church, many of the songs were in Latin, giving them a certain compelling intrigue and gravitas, especially when splashed about with incense. But here, with the smell of the dry hay wafting in through the open windows and voices pouring out a grief in a way a ten year old could understand, I felt the presence of God. Donnie was in heaven.

More than 50 years later, Donnie’s twin Ronnie and I sit talking of that dark time. I haven’t seen him since we were children. We moved away from Kerrs Creek not long after Donnie died. And lost touch.

“After I lost my twin brother,” Ronnie says, “I hit the skids. I didn’t want to be around people. I’m kind of a solo type person. Went in the service. My number came up. Went to Nam. I knew I could get killed. You just lived day by day. Take each day as it comes. I’m an old believer in you got to control your mind, not let your mind control you. There’s certain room for worry but after a given time you’ve got to let it go. Like seeing Donnie get killed. We were closer than me and you are right now. That was rough. That was entirely rough. You never forget it but you got to get over it. People die. That’s part of living. Live every day for what it is.”

We’re sitting in Ronnie’s antique-filled home. Outside the lawn is mowed to golf course perfection. Flowers bloom. Tomatoes hang like Christmas balls.

“Back when I was a kid,” says Ronnie, “Donnie and I used to go down to the spring and get the water in buckets. It was probably 150 yards from the house. You’d go down there early in the morning, there’d be bear tracks. It was really neat. Back then the bears came out in the fields all the time. Back then there were very few deer in Rockbridge County. Wasn’t till the mid-60s before they really started to come in. They come through my yard here now. I have to spray to keep ‘em away from my tomatoes. All my life I’ve had some kind of garden. Never had to put a fence around it. Got a ground hog in every once in a while, but that was about it.”

We rock back and forth between the past and the present.

“When I was a kid, I never thought much about what I’d do when I grew up,” he says. “I kind of got burned out on farming because it was something I was made to do. Worked my ass off. Back in the 50’s, we were farming about 400 acres. We put up hay all the time. Granddaddy owned 300 acres on the western side of Big House. We’d go up there in the spring with the cattle truck full of steers, let ‘em out, then walk the perimeter fixing fence. When we went back to get those cows in the fall, they were just like deer. Completely wild. That’s why I’m so skinny and long-legged, chasing those cows up the mountain.” He laughs the laugh of a happy man. He and his wife, Lois, have been married 21 years and she flits in and out of the room while we’re talking to see if we need anything. They tease each other kindly.

“It took a couple of days to get them all herded. We had a catch pen down the bottom of the mountain. We’d herd them all in there then get ‘em on the truck. There were plots of pasture field on the mountain then. It was mostly woods but several acres of

grassland here and there. Not anymore. It's all grown up. We'd go up there and pick black raspberries. I love 'em but you can't find 'em anymore. Mama made pies and jams. Mmmmmmm....mmmm.

"We used to hike back in to the Meadow Ground (on White Rock Mt. across Rt. 60 from Big House.). We didn't know who owned most of the land. We just went. No boundaries back then. Like hunting season. You didn't ask. You just went hunting. Today you'd get shot for crossing borders.

"We used to go hunting on House Mountain all the time. Just cross the road from our house and go on up the mountain. I've camped on top a bunch of times. Sometimes we just went up to spend the night. There's no view anywhere around like the view from up there, before the interstates came through."

"My grandfather, William Howard Ayers, was born and raised here back in the 1800s but he went to Zenia, Ohio, as a sharecropper. That's where he met his wife, the English lady, my grandmother. Sarah Barwise. Married her and brought her back to Virginia. To Kerr's Creek."

"Grandma was a kind of quiet person. She never really mingled or talked much. The only thing I can remember is her churning butter. She worked all the time. Back then you made everything you had. Raised everything. Only thing we bought at the grocery store was coffee and sugar. Stuff like that. We ground our own flour. We'd harvest the grain, shake the seeds off the stalks, and run it through a hammer mill—runs off a belt on the tractor—breaks the seeds up and gets the meat out. We raised wheat, oats and

barley. Sometimes we raised buckwheat. If you've never had buckwheat pancakes, you're missing something. It's better for you, too. Better than the wheat flour.

"We'd run the wheat through a threshing machine. Adam Swink came around every year at harvest time and all the neighbors—the Dunlaps, Hotingers—would come and help us and we'd help them. Families worked together to do the farming and the women would all be in one kitchen, doing the cooking." He leans back and pats his stomach. "You talk about a meal. Great day!" A loud groan. "Sweet potatoes, beans, squash, tomatoes. All home grown. We'd be at a farm for a week or two during the harvest season then move on to the next one until we got it all done.

"When Donnie and I came home in the evening from school, we worked until it got too dark to see. Then we'd go to the house and get something to eat. After that, if you had any more energy, we'd do our homework. But, most times, the homework never got done. Too damn tired to do it."

A silence. We know where we want this conversation to go, but how to get there? How to open that door?

"When I got back from Nam, I bought the old homeplace. My grandfather's place. The other house, the one I lived in until I was 16, the year after Donnie died, was bought by Dr. John Sedovy. I was at the sale and met him. Told him I was born and raised in that old house and asked him what he planned to do with it."

'I'm going to fix it up,' he said.

'That's wonderful,' I said. 'That place has a lot of memories for me.'

"A couple of years later," he called me and said, "'Ronnie, I've had carpenters look at the old house and it's not worth fixing. I've got to tear it down.'

"With respect to me," says Ronnie, "he took some boards out of the kitchen over top of the old wood cook stove. He took those boards to a carpenter and had a trunk made for me. I love this man for that. He's a good person. I just knew him from that one time at the sale. You can learn people if you start talking to them.

The layers of intervening years are peeling away as Ronnie and I talk of this and that, slowly making our way around to the day Donnie died.

"That day," Ronnie says finally. "Sam Vest Jr., he was over there at the house. The old grey house. We called it the Hull house. And we were playing. I don't recall exactly what we were doing. But Donnie and I and he decided we'd go to his house and spend the night. Only way to get there was to walk. Probably four or five miles through the fields. We were walking, and we had one bicycle, and one 22 rifle and we're taking turns on the bicycle or carrying the rifle. Got back next to Buford Wilhelm's. They lived back over there in the Hackens we used to call it. It was Donnie's turn to carry the rifle. We got over to Buford's house. It was an old house trailer with three or four steps. Joan Wilhelm was a registered nurse and we were standing on the ground talking to her. She was standing in the doorway. Donnie went to set the gun down. It was an old single shot. You had to pull the hammer back. When he set it down, it hit the pin, firing the bullet off and it went through here."

Ronnie traces a course up under his chin and across his head. “We got him in the car and I kind of passed out. I couldn’t believe what had happened. I came to when we got to Warren Smith’s store. They let me out there. This was about five o’clock in the evening. I went into Warren’s store and asked him if he’d give me a ride home. He asked me what happened. I told him and said I had to tell the family about it.”

A long pause and I can feel Ronnie slipping away to that day. The lines in his face deepen. His eyes glisten. “They were all setting around the table eating,” he says. “My grandfather, he came over every day and he was setting there, too. Mama started hollering ‘where’s Donnie at?’”

Ronnie and I both take a deep breath, wishing there was another way to end this story.

“You know, it’s funny,” he said, “Walking across that field, you know how boys are. When they get together they’re always cussing a little bit, you know. And Donnie, all the way across that field, he was on me and Sam Jr. to stop cussing. We were teasing him – ‘when did you get so righteous?’”

Another deep breath. And another....

Then Ronnie’s quiet voice. “I do...I do...after experiencing that, I do believe a person knows when their number is up. His whole attitude that day before the occurrence, it was different. He was different. He was on us about things he used to do. Like cussing. I believe he was trying to leave us a message. I can’t forget it. I can still see it. I can still feel it every day. Every minute.” He looks over at me. “Then again – life goes on.”

“Once he got shot, he was kind of out of it. Slinging his arms around. The bullet didn’t go all the way through his head. A 22 once it goes in, it doesn’t have enough power to go on through; it just cuts around inside your brain from side to side. Joan Wilhelm kept him living till the hospital. Mouth to mouth.

“My mother broke down.” Ronnie stares down a beam of light on the floor. It took us a long time to get over it. Years. My family’s always been one that accepts things. Here, and then they’re gone. You don’t forget. But you have to go on. It never leaves me, though. It never will.”

Like the smell of molasses. For years, I couldn’t bear the smell of molasses. Still don’t much like it.