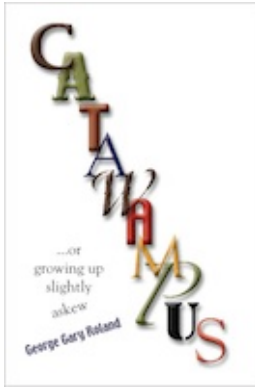


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...or
growing up
slightly
askew

George Gary Roland



Catawampus is a coming-of-age story driven by the premonition of an alcoholic father that his eldest son would play professional baseball, the slow, inexorable descent of the mother into emotional illness, and the author's role as youngest son and chronicler. It is, nevertheless, a tale of triumph, underscored by humor and the sustenance afforded by family and friends.

Catawampus

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CATAWAMPUS

Or

Growing Up Slightly Askew

George Gary Roland

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First Edition

Chapter One

Friends have observed I'm so obsessive-compulsive that the lady who cleans my house has to bring her own dirt. I can't explain why I'm like that, but I am fairly certain when the proclivity began: nine months to the hour after my conception. Mama said that was when I was born and, after all, she should know, having been intimately involved in both the formation and delivery. For his part, Daddy stated he liked a man who showed up on time. We OCDs are big on punctuality. Anyway, just prior to the end of my gestation and at the insistence of my contracting mother, my father set about implementing a more cost-effective means for my arrival than that expended on my brother.

Frugality was a necessary concern, both for lack of financial resources and because the occasion demanded a drink. The fee for bringing my only sibling, James Ivan Jr., into this Veil of Tears—that's what Daddy called it—was reputed to have been some ninety dollars. James the senior had it on good authority that the same birthing procedure could be had for half that amount across the line, in the Peach State. Thus it was that in December of 1946 he bundled up my shrieking mother, Florence Virginia, in a blanket, laid her in the cab of a neighbor's truck and off we sped to Clayton, Georgia, some forty miles away.

Okay, "sped" is a bit of an embellishment. The vehicle in question was running on about half of its six cylinders and consumed oil at a prodigious rate because most of it spewed directly out the exhaust pipe in a blue haze which trailed us like an ominous thunderhead. Two of the three forward gears worked, first and third, so you had to gun it, then shift into a barely perceptible crawl. The complete absence of reverse and an adequate battery meant that when parking, one had to

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take pains to swing it around pointing downhill. Other than that it was serviceable—although Mama took exception to the lack of a window that could actually roll up. Daddy explained that this particular handicap was of little consequence since the heater didn't work anyhow. Mama was not persuaded. Praise be, though, the radio worked, so they listened to "Clear Channel WLAC, Nashville, Tennessee, Broadcasting from High Atop the Fisher Building," which was the way Daddy always identified it.

Between contractions, Mama commented on the fumes and Daddy said that Humbolt Current, our neighbor and the truck's owner, told him the vehicle had a "fleeting if somewhat tenuous relationship with its lubricants." Mama said that didn't sound like something Humbolt would say and what did he really say? Chastised, Daddy responded, "My love, I have always endeavored to shield you from the virulent and harsh realities of this unrelenting and unforgiving place, so I did indeed couch his admonition in gentler terms. What he actually said was that this truck went through Quaker State like 'shit through a goose' and every time I stopped, I should fill it up with oil and check the gas." Mama said that sounded a whole lot closer to the truth of the matter and she added that both Humbolt and Daddy were full of s-h-i-t, and she spelled it out so as to be gentle her own self.

I have often wondered if Mama knew her harshest reality would prove to be sitting next to her, driving that dilapidated conveyance south to my birth. I hope not. Not then.

I have said we were riding in a truck. But technically it was a car made over into a truck. Humbolt and his wife, Eddy, had a bunch of young'uns and to accommodate them all, he had to remove the roof and body from the center post back of their Studebaker. Then he welded on a flatbed and benches. There were three sets of twin boys: Moby and Dick, Robinson and Crusoe and, yes, Absalom and Absalom. Things really starting adding up when you tossed in the girls, who mostly came in pairs too. There was Moll and Flanders; Jane and Eyre; Hester and Prynne; Mary and Shelley; one set of triplets for good measure, Charlotte, Emily and Jane; and last, Serendipity, whom they didn't expect, but I really can't see why not.

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Humbolt had fastened a sheet of plywood and an old mattress to the back of the cab and strung ropes so as to strap in the little ones, and the rest sat on benches like in a coliseum, holding the babies and watching over the rest. He was right proud of his family and vehicle and loaned Daddy his truck on condition he mention them and it when telling the story because he knew this episode would foster one, so I feel I'm obliged to ... and I just did.

The bill indeed proved to be half that of my brother's birth. Actually, Daddy got another five dollars knocked off by trading the doctor a gallon of moonshine he had brought along for such an eventuality.

I always thought that the bonded whiskey my father drank after we moved to Raleigh was what messed him up. A man could take a horn of "shine" and go about his business, whether it be reading, making music or just watching the sun set through a prism as it folded itself into the ancient undulations of our mountains. A body had to devote himself to that other stuff. Daddy said we had stump water in the hills with more kick to it than that stuff which came in pint bottles with a tax stamp across the cap. Truth is, some folk get ten feet high and think they're bulletproof when imbibing white liquor, but Daddy merely mellowed out and quoted Shakespeare. To be gender neutral on the topic, I have seen some women threaten to whup every "swingin' dick" in the place and, one time, watched Maude Gunnin do just that.

Anyhow, this economic windfall couldn't go unrewarded or unrecognized so James Sr., tired of an unrelenting regimen of homemade whiskey, thought it only fitting that he purchase a substantial portion of the price differential in Pabst Blue Ribbon before we crossed back into our portion of the Old North State, which at the time was dry.

Mama said Daddy was real proud and took me into the State Line Package Store Tavern and Grill to show me off. Mama elected to stay in the truck, seeing as how she was wore out and Daddy had managed to fix the heater while she was in delivery. He passed me around and everybody said what a fine-looking baby I was. Well, actually, Lula Belle Bradshaw, the waitress and bartender and cook and owner, said they was all a bunch of half-drunk fools and would probably drop me,

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so she made 'um just slide me down the bar from one regular to another ... but they did say I was an outstanding specimen of manhood.

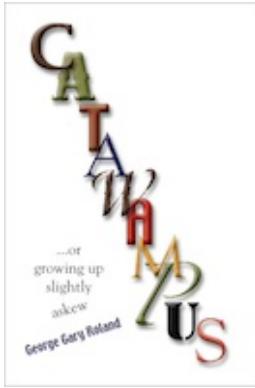
All except Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard Bates, that is, 'cause when I got to him, he arranged me first one way, then the other and announced, "This is the ugliest young'un I've ever laid eyes on. Why, he's all mouth. It runs from here to there with nuthin' along the way to break up the landscape. And lips! Lord help the poor misshapen thing. That boy's got lips like a dromedary."

"God Almighty General," Lula Belle interjected while properly orienting me, "you've got him turned over and side-addled. The boy's catawampus. That's his rear end you're examining."

I figure that has to be some kind of record, even in our clan, to have crossed the threshold of your first beer joint at less than one day of age. Daddy couldn't tote both me and the beer, so some of the men volunteered to help. They laid the cases in the bed and tipped their hats to Mama and said what a handsome young fella I was, and that tickled her. Lula Belle brought her out some hot cocoa and they exchanged a few words about the general uselessness of men, and we set about getting ready to leave.

They all lined up behind that rusted-out Studebaker, found a handhold that wouldn't give way and pushed. Daddy dropped it into third, popped the clutch and we left our benefactors in an all-encompassing fog of petroleum distillates.

Mama sort of eyed Daddy when she noticed the wet beer stains and cigarette ashes on my blanket and said it looked like someone had mopped up the floor with me. She didn't raise too much of a fuss, though, and Daddy reached into the front pocket of his overalls, retrieved a church key and opened a cold one for each of them in order to celebrate me arriving with all my toes and fingers and such. Then he turned up the radio 'cause Roy Acuff had launched into "The Wabash Cannonball" and my father dearly loved to sing along and he was pretty good at it too. So that's how I came to be, and we all headed home.



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