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people on the move.*

PORTABLE LIVES

By Vicki and John Combs

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PORTABLE LIVES

Vicki and John Combs



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Table of Contents

FOREWORD.....	vii
PREFACE <i>by Vicki</i>	ix
Guahan <i>by Vicki</i>	1
Burlington <i>by Vicki</i>	12
Unexpected Souvenirs <i>by Vicki</i>	22
Casualties of War <i>by Vicki</i>	29
John's Portable Childhood Beginnings <i>by John</i>	33
The Go in Gotebo <i>by John</i>	37
The Be in Bennington <i>by John</i>	39
Hooking Hoopers and Other Colbert Events.....	41
Roff <i>by John</i>	52
Porum <i>by John</i>	56
Gould <i>by John</i>	64
Leedey <i>by John</i>	84
A Coaltown Christmas <i>by Vicki</i>	100
Gunshot <i>by Vicki</i>	117
Miss Ida's Moon <i>by Vicki</i>	122
Be Prepared or, I Will Do My Best <i>by John</i>	134
The Pit <i>by Vicki</i>	140
The Knight of Nights <i>by John</i>	153
Ring Out Old Shapes <i>by Vicki</i>	164

Vicki and John Combs

Cullin' 'Maters <i>by Vicki</i>	200
Matinée <i>by Vicki</i>	207
Black Carbon Nights <i>by Vicki</i>	216
Lions in Spring <i>by Vicki</i>	230
Crossings <i>by Vicki</i>	234
Towel Turban or Some People Sing <i>by John</i>	244
Dinner Burlesque <i>by Vicki</i>	267
Bird Fall <i>by Vicki</i>	275
Dream Dust <i>by Vicki</i>	279
Bicycle Christmas <i>by Vicki</i>	280
Nexus or Syzygy <i>by Vicki</i>	282
Ode on the Olive <i>by Vicki</i>	284
Dreams and Psychic Stuff <i>by John</i>	286
How Embarrassing <i>by John</i>	293
Excursions <i>by Vicki</i>	302
A Postscript to <i>Excursions</i> <i>by John</i>	307
APPENDIX A Life before and during Birth <i>by Vicki Lyle</i>	311
APPENDIX B Vicki's Self-written Obituary	315
APPENDIX C A Character of Vicki <i>by John</i>	318
ADDENDUM (Written 15 June 2013).....	322

Miss Ida's Moon

by Vicki

“Preacher? Preacher!”

Ida Mae St. Clair pushed through the side porch door into our kitchen, where Mom was cooking dinner. No knock. Miss Ida never knocked. She thought the parsonage was open to the public, especially to her because she lived across the street and, 70 years old, considered herself the matriarch of the neighborhood. If Miss Ida encountered a locked door, as she frequently had since we moved into the parsonage, she was direct: “You’ve got your door locked. How come?” Sometimes Mom would joke or change the subject, but on rough or hectic days she refused to answer, leaving an uncomfortable silence.

Moving over to the kitchen sink, Ida leaned on the counter. “Is the preacher here?” she asked.

Mom checked the squash before replying. “No, Ida. He’s in a meeting at the church.”

“Well, I wanted to tell him that Hubert Doss may not be at church on Sunday.”

Hubert was a member and regular attender of Dundee Methodist, Dad's primary church. Miss Ida attended the Baptist church, but she prided herself on keeping up with the daily activities of Dundee inhabitants.

Ida shifted weight so she could see what we were having for dinner—green beans, summer squash, and corn bread, with garden-ripe tomatoes and just pulled green onions. Church members kept our family of six well-supplied with fresh garden produce, helping to stretch the meager salaries paid by rural churches in Kentucky. Miss Ida never wanted to eat with us—Mom had asked her several times—she just wanted to know what we were having.

“Now I say, I say, Sister Lyle. You had company today. Who was it?”

Mom's lips tightened. This was the real reason Miss Ida had come over. She couldn't abide not knowing what was happening or who was doing what. If someone new or strange came calling, she worked and wheedled until she oozed it out of people a little at a time. She just had to know. But Mom wasn't used to inquisitive neighbors, so Ida had to work a lot harder for information, and she frequently left frustrated. From the sudden glimmer in Mom's eye, I could tell that today she wasn't in the mood to satisfy Miss Ida's curiosity.

Our “company” had been a pastor and his wife from another county. They had been driving through town and

stopped to meet Mom and Dad. After twenty minutes of getting acquainted, Mom had sent them down the street to Dad's church office.

“Oh, that was just a couple who wanted to see Wayne.” Mom's answer was full of possibilities and, from Miss Ida's perspective, far from complete.

“Well I say now, what did they want with the preacher?”

“Ida,” Mom said abruptly, “would you mind looking at my strawberry freezer jam? It doesn't seem to be setting up properly, and I'm not sure why.”

“Well, how much sugar did you use?” And suddenly Miss Ida was lecturing Mom on freezer jams, how ripe the berries should be, what kind of jars to use, how much sugar and pectin. Usually her directions were specific enough to sound authentic but vague enough to not reveal all of her secrets, but that didn't matter because Mom had finished jam-making. That fall when we opened the first jar, I noticed that her jam had gelled just fine.

Miss Ida got on Mom's bad side the first time she called her “Sister Lyle.” It was the day we moved in, and we were unloading the van when Ida hobbled onto the carport. A combination of arthritis, a slight limp and several extra pounds caused her to hitch her left leg when she walked.

“Are you the new preacher?”

Dad put his box down and walked over.

“I’m Ida Mae St. Clair, Preacher, but people here call me Miss Ida. I live in that white house there, across the street.”

We eventually learned that Miss Ida was not technically a “miss.” Her husband had died in his late 50s, and her two sons were grown and gone—one in the military and the other in Colorado, But I never heard anyone call her “Mrs. St. Clair” or “Ida Mae St. Clair” or “Ida Mae,” just “Miss Ida.”

Miss Ida had come bearing gifts: several jars of canned peaches, green beans, and cucumber pickles, which she pushed toward Mom and Dad with an abrupt yet shy, “Here.” Her grey hair was pulled back in a wide bun and tied with a printed cotton handkerchief, but long wisps of hair had freed themselves to frame her straight mouth and soft blue eyes. A faded

three-quarter-length cotton dress stretched over Miss Ida’s low bosom and square hips, and over that she wore an apron with two large pockets, a floral print that contrasted with the beige of her dress. Her stockings were rolled, and her shoes were odd pointy flats, a style I’d never seen. In the days to come, we would frequently see the prints of those shoes in the soil of the small garden at the back of our house. Apparently,

Miss Ida liked to check the progress of her neighbors' produce.

After introductions, Ida followed my mother into the kitchen, gripping the door facing to pull herself up the two steps that led from the carport to the side porch door. Inside, she immediately said, "You and Brother Lyle are a lot younger than the other preachers who've been here."

That was true. Mom and Dad were both in their 30s, and I remembered the silver-grey hair of the minister that Dad was replacing. Ida glanced at Mom to gauge her reaction. Then, with a shy grin, she said, "Well, Sister Lyle, I guess we're going to be neighbors."

"She knows I hate that," Mom would declare regularly during our three years in Dundee. "She knows my first name. She just does that to aggravate me." But in gentler moods, when she heard about some kindness Miss Ida had bestowed, usually from her garden, Mom would say, "She has a good heart."

Miss Ida was famous for her garden, and for her skill in canning its produce. We could tell from the precise, weed-free rows and lush foliage that her garden held secrets. Her cabbages were huge, usually 10 inches in diameter, but the leaves were tender and sweet. She grew pods of plump green peas, fat stems of broccoli and bush beans, yellow squash and zucchini, potatoes, okra, and cucumbers. Zinnias, marigolds,

and nasturtiums finished each row, coloring the garden with crimson, fuchsia, lemon, and bronze.

When we asked Miss Ida how she grew such a beautiful garden, she said she planted by the moon and the stars, the moon mostly, a mysterious system that, for Ida, yielded the county's largest and most beautiful vegetable garden.

And Ida was generous, sharing her harvest and her canned goods with people who were sick, feeble, or didn't have room for a garden. If visitors came by our house when we weren't there, Ida would tell them where we had gone—even if she didn't know—and then take them across the road to her garden, where she picked and bagged whatever they needed. In the process, she would steadily inquire about the visitors, where they were from, who their family was, how they knew us, and then she would share information about us and any other residents the visitors might know. By the time we returned home, Ida was waiting with a full report. Mom and Dad often worried what friends and conference members thought of our over-interested neighbor, whether they were offended by her questions. But when they called, they always commented on the helpful and generous woman who lived across the street.

“Miss Ida, what is ‘planting by the moon?’”

I was holding a metal gallon bucket that Ida was quickly filling with late-harvest beans.

“Well now,” she replied. “It’s hard to explain.”

“What does the moon have to do with planting?”

“Well, the moon has to be right, and the stars have to be in the right position.”

“But what do you mean, ‘the right position?’” From science classes and observation, I knew that the earth’s rotation and orbit made stars appear to move around.

Pausing and straightening for a minute, Miss Ida said: “It’s something my mama taught me. I can’t explain it, it’s just somethin’ I know. And I use the book.”

“The book?” I loved books, but I hadn’t heard that they could plant gardens.

“Th’almanac,” she replied, running the two words together.

I didn’t know if she was keeping secrets again or if she really couldn’t explain how she planted, but her system worked, and that was enough for Miss Ida.

The door problem solved itself. One afternoon when most of us were in the back of the house, Miss Ida opened the porch door and shuffled through the kitchen.

“Preacher? Preacher?”

At the door to the den, she stopped. She had found Dad, all right.

Trying to change for evening services but finding the bathroom occupied, Dad was standing in the den, wearing only a shirt and underwear, holding his Wednesday evening sermon in one hand and his just-ironed pants in the other.

“Good afternoon, Miss Ida,” Dad said calmly.

But Miss Ida was already gone, and the side porch door was banging behind her. We didn’t see her again for two weeks. Apparently embarrassed by seeing the preacher in his drawers, she stayed busy in her garden. After the underwear incident, whenever Miss Ida came to the house she knocked or shouted first—“Sister Lyle? Preacher?”—and then she waited until someone opened the door. Mom was amazed that such a persistent source of frustration had been so easily resolved.

In March of our second year at Dundee, Dad came home one day and announced that Ed Graham, a prominent member of Dundee Methodist, thought that we should have a bigger

garden. Mr. Graham and his wife Mildred owned a quarter-acre lot, mostly fenced, located across the street and down a block. The lot was opposite from the Masonic Lodge, a church-like building with an 80-foot spire topped with a goat, an unusual weather vane that people said was brought over from Dundee, Scotland, in 1872. Mr. Graham told Dad that, if we were interested, he would plow and disc the property after he prepared his own fields. We were interested.

As weeks went by, we worried that Mr. Graham had forgotten his offer. Everyone around us had already planted early-season crops of peas, cabbage, and Brussels sprouts. But one Thursday afternoon when we stopped by the property, there he was, perched atop a faded red tractor. He was pulling large-bladed discs over the field, turning and folding the earth into fat ribbons of chocolate. When he began the second pass, Mr. Graham switched to smaller blades, sifting the chunks of chocolate into rich brown flour of friable soil. By suppertime he was through, and the field was ready to plant.

Plowed, the L-shaped plot looked immense. From the street end, it sloped gently toward the base of its L, so we planted potatoes in the lower left part, the short bottom of the L. We planted all weekend and then weekdays after supper—flat, cream-colored seeds of summer squash, smooth hard ovals of bean, and hard yellow kernels of corn. We planted okra, zucchini, white half-runner beans—“the best bean,”

Mom said—and pole beans. We hilled tomato plants, mounded cucumbers and squash, and sowed larger spaces with cantaloupe and watermelon. One afternoon while we were planting beans, Miss Ida stopped by to observe our progress.

“Why are you plantin’ your beans?” she asked. “The stars aren’t right for planting beans.”

“We have to plant when we can, Ida,” Mom replied. We kept right on planting.

As spring became summer, we hoed and weeded—for a while. But the garden was too large for us to keep up with, especially later in July and August when the heat and humidity set in. Compared to Miss Ida’s, our garden was weedy, wild, and disorderly. Despite our late start, however, the garden produced. Bushels and bushels it produced. Soon, the fertility of the preacher’s garden was a hot topic in town. The more beans and squash and tomatoes we harvested, the more frustrated Miss Ida became, especially when people began stopping by to admire the productivity. All summer we picked and canned and froze and gave away, and still our garden kept giving.

By the end of July, Miss Ida was fit to be tied. The weedier our garden became, the neater and cleaner hers became. If someone erred by complimenting our garden in

front of Miss Ida, she quickly replied, “They don’t know much about weedin’ and hoein’, though, do they?”

“Now I say, Sister Lyle, exactly what days did you plant your beans?”

The third time Miss Ida asked, Mom gave her the same answer she had before. “I really don’t remember, Ida. We didn’t have time to keep track.”

The munificent bounty of our garden remained a mystery to Miss Ida, and to us. Whether the garden had been blessed by the moon and stars, by the virgin soil of the property, or by the fresh manure Mr. Graham had tilled into the soil when he plowed, we never knew for sure.

That winter, Miss Ida fussed and fretted about the coming spring, planning and charting, studying her Farmer’s Almanac. But she needn’t have worried about potential competition from us because we didn’t plant Mr. Graham’s field again. Dad had received early word from the District Superintendent that we might move to another church in May, so we decided to plant the smaller garden at the back of our yard instead. With the smaller garden, the new minister and his family would enjoy a few summer vegetables while settling into the community.

The week we were packing to leave, Miss Ida brought over a large pot of green beans and some fresh corn bread.

Looking at Mom, she said, “I figured you wouldn’t have time to cook up any beans this week.”

As Mom took the beans, she gave Miss Ida a quick hug. Embarrassed, Ida stepped back a little. “It’s sure going to be quiet around here when you all leave.”

For a while she watched us pack, then she said, “Now I say, now I say, Lenette, what about this new preacher? Does he have a big family? Is he a young one or an old one?”

(NOTE: “Miss Ida’s Moon” was first published in *the 2010 New Southerner Literary Edition*.)

The Knight of Nights

by John

I

When it came to women, during my college years I was more of a Don Quixote than a Don Juan—delusional, fantasizing, inept. My Dulcinea never quite materialized.

In the fall of 1947, I set out on a new adventure. Having graduated from Leedey High School in May, I was eager to begin my quest into the perilous woods of college. On a bright September morning my father drove down Oklahoma State Highway 34 to its intersection with U.S. 66, just outside Elk City, and dumped me on the roadside.

“Good luck, son, I hope you do well,” said Dad. He always spoke laconically except when he presented rather lengthy Sunday sermons at Leedey Methodist Church.

“Thanks, Pop.”

And suddenly I was on my own, just me, my footlocker, and my thumb. Wisely, I had painted my footlocker black and had added large block orange letters.

**OKLAHOMA A&M
OR BUST**

Who could resist? In the three or four separate rides that I hitched to Stillwater, I did not stand on highway shoulders more than 15 minutes. My last ride delivered me to the Lambda Chi Alpha house where I would reside. My brothers Jim and Brack, both members, had arranged for me to pledge the fraternity and to earn my room and board as a houseboy.

My enthusiasm for college soared during Freshman Orientation Week. Fifteen hundred of us gathered in the field house for aptitude and placement tests, but I could hardly concentrate on the tests, for I had never seen so many beautiful 18-year-old girls. The schools in the little Oklahoma towns I'd grown up in always had some attractive girls—but a small number. At this orientation I saw dozens of pretty women everywhere I looked.

“My God, would you just look at that blonde over there,” I thought. “By golly, that brunette next to her is not bad either.” Like Charlie Brown, I wished that red-haired girl coming up the steps would sit by me.

Then and there my dreams of a college romance escalated to fever pitch.

Reality quickly shattered my hopes. First, in 1947 the ratio of men to women at Oklahoma A&M was seven to one. Second, and most significant, the majority of the men were veterans of World War II, now attending college on the G.I. Bill. More than 264,000 Oklahomans served in the armed forces during the war; 5500 of them died, but the vast majority of survivors returned to Oklahoma, and an estimated 40,000 of them enrolled in college. In 1947, veterans made up 43% of the A&M student body.* The main reason for my shattered hopes now becomes obvious:

On a campus flooded with veterans, what coed would want to go out with a callow seventeen-year-old boy when she could so easily date a man?

Moreover, virtually all of the veterans owned cars, and my only steed was my two feet. As the son of an underpaid clergyman, I could hardly afford to buy a car.

In my desperation to find a date, I would try weeks in advance. Some evenings after supper I would telephone sorority houses and ask whoever answered the phone, "Is there anyone there who would like to go to a movie or walk to the corner drugstore for a Coke?" Invariably, there wasn't. My efforts produced roughly the same effect as a butt burp in a 70-mile-per-hour windstorm.

After dozens of attempts to secure a date, I finally arranged a Coke date with Martha Benson, an Alpha Delta Pi

from Tulsa. Martha was tall, attractive, personable, and easy to talk with. We hit it off fairly well and went two or three times to the corner drugstore for drinks—on foot, of course. On our last date, as we walked down sorority row toward her sorority house, I summoned up my courage and asked her, “May I hold your hand?”

“I guess it will be okay,” she replied, “but don’t squeeze it.”

“Now I’m getting somewhere,” I thought. “This is progressing swimmingly.”

A few days after my last Coke date with Martha, I went to see Joe Bob Earls, a high school buddy who was visiting Stillwater and staying at a local motel. When I came out of Joe Bob’s room, I saw Martha coming out of another room with an older man, obviously a veteran.

From her peculiar grin, I realized that she had also spotted me. Another dream shattered.

I told Melvin Settles, one of my Lambda Chi Alpha pledge brothers, about seeing Martha at the motel.

“Man, didn’t you know? Everyone knows that she will fuck any guy she goes out with.”

At least she let me hold her hand.

I managed one other date during fall semester. For some now inexplicable reason—loneliness perhaps—I pledged membership in Pi Epsilon Pi, a pep organization more popularly known as Hell Hounds. In addition to a considerable amount of hazing, pledges suffered a number of indignities. In fact, the hazing was so severe that only 40 of the 145 pledges actually made it to initiation,

During the first week, the Hell Hounds required pledges to secure a date with a redhead, buy her a steak sandwich, and eat an onion sandwich while she ate her steak. Considering the shortage of females, getting a date with a redhead was as hopeless as fighting a windmill, and I might as well have worn a wash basin on my head.

After several abortive attempts through usual channels, I resorted to stopping redheaded coeds on campus walkways and begging them to help me. Finally, I pursued a redhead up the steps of a women's dormitory, stopped her, and explained my problem.

"I wish I could help you," she said, "but I can't. I'm married. I was just going into the dorm to see a friend."

In my desperation I begged her: "Please ask your husband if I can take you to the drugstore for a steak sandwich and a Coke. I promise you I won't try any funny stuff."

She asked, he consented, and I had my date with a redhead. A few weeks later I was one of the 40 pledges formally initiated as a Hell Hound.

At the beginning of spring semester, I realized that a crisis lay ahead. The Lambda Chi spring formal dance was coming up in April, and the fraternity required pledges to attend and to bring a date. In January frat members were already asking: “Combs, who are you bringing to the prom?”

O God, what could I do?

Then it struck me: I would import a woman. I phoned Georgina Colbert, a Leedey girl I had finished high school with, who now attended Oklahoma University. It was a long shot, for in high school she, a pretty blue-eyed blonde, had generally ignored me as not in her league.

Surprisingly, Georgina sounded friendly and receptive on the phone, and when she accepted my invitation, I was overjoyed. Prom night would be my night of nights. When I walked into the dance with the beautiful Georgina on my arm, the fraternity members and pledges would be surprised and envious.

In the intervening weeks, I worked to accumulate money to entertain Georgina in style. Every month my parents sent me \$45 out of Dad’s \$200 pastor’s salary, so I designated part of my allowance to the prom. After class and on weekends I

worked at Johnny Weilmuenster's Mobil station fueling tanks, repairing flat tires, and doing grease jobs, earning a whopping 60 cents an hour. From my earnings I salted away a hefty percentage, and two or three weekends I stayed sober to save the money I would otherwise have spent on beer or booze. By prom time, I had amassed \$118 to import Georgina and show her a good time—big money in 1948. I sent her a roundtrip bus ticket from Norman to Stillwater, bought her a nice corsage for her evening gown, and paid in advance for her motel room.

My sister-in-law Marge, a home economics major at A&M, took one of my brother Brack's naval officer uniforms and converted it into a tuxedo with satin lapels and pant stripes. It was beautiful. No one would attend the ball better armored than I.

Brack lent me his car, and I drove to the motel and knocked on Georgina's door. Georgina opened the door, and there she stood, dressed in a blue sleeveless gown and long white gloves. Stuttering a few words about how nice she looked, I presented her the corsage of white chrysanthemums. It complemented her gown perfectly. Filled with joy and pride, I drove her to the prom. When we walked into the ballroom, I could see the open-mouthed, open-eyed astonishment of the fraternity's members and my fellow pledges.

Georgina granted me the first dance, a foxtrot, and she seemed almost as nervous as I felt. After that, Georgina danced virtually every dance with Bill Wright, an older Lambda Chi member and, of course, a veteran. Soon I realized that Georgina had come to see Bill, not me. Later I would learn from a fraternity member that she had dated Bill before. I hadn't known that they even knew each other. Long before the dance reached "Stardust," they both had disappeared. I have no idea how Bill's date—if he even had one—got home.

After the dance, I went to drown my disappointment at a post-prom party at Brack and Marge's apartment. Everyone there got smashed, and every time someone called the bootlegger, I was asked for my wallet. The balance of my \$118—like Georgina and Bill—disappeared.

Totally plastered, I righteously decided to quit smoking and gave my brother Jim an almost full carton of blackmarket Camel cigarettes and my lighter. When I sobered up the next day, I asked Jim for my cigarettes and lighter. He replied, rather emphatically, "No, you're not going to be a welcher with me."

No cigarettes, no lighter, no money, no dignity—and I never saw or heard from Georgina Colbert again.

II

“Inform them that he is...known as the Knight of the Mournful Countenance.”

(Cervantes in *Don Quixote*)

After the spring prom debacle, I thought, “Surely there will be other nights and other women.” My hope for better fortune soon took shape in the person of Johnny Manton, my first cousin once removed, a self-designated hotshot who was also an A&M student. A brown-haired, brown-eyed, sometimes pompous fellow about 5’10”, Johnny was fairly handsome, but hardly the deity’s gift he fancied himself to be. Like me, he found it difficult to arrange dates on campus. Though he experienced occasional streaks of sanity, Johnny was both impulsive and dramatic. He relished his role as a cadet officer in the ROTC and was proud of his extensive collection of German army memorabilia, including a Nazi uniform jacket with a swastika armband. As a joke, he would put on the jacket and his Nazi helmet, thrust his hand into the air, and shout “Heil Hitler” to his friends.

A couple of weeks following spring prom, Johnny said to me, “Let’s go down to OU and pick up some girls.”

“Sounds good to me,” I responded.

So we hopped on his Harley and headed for Norman. When the anticipated queue of females desiring our services failed to appear, we cycled to an off-campus pool hall to pass the time until OU coeds realized we were in town and available. Johnny and I played several games of snooker. As I stepped down from the bench on one of my turns to shoot, my foot caught the edge of a spittoon, sloshing tobacco juice all over my pants leg. We were traveling light on the motorcycle, so I didn't have a change of clothing.

After it became obvious that we were not attracting women, Johnny asked me, desperately, "Don't you know *any* girls at OU?"

"Well," I replied, "I know Georgina Colbert."

Then I told Johnny, "Look, we might have better luck in Oklahoma City. The girl I dated my senior year in high school lives there now, and I know her address."

"Let's go see her," declared Johnny. "Maybe she has a friend for me."

We jumped on the Harley and tore off for Oklahoma City. Fortunately, we found Carlene at home. When I introduced Johnny, he pinched her cheek and said, "My, aren't you a cute little thing." Taking umbrage, Carlene slapped him hard enough to leave a red handprint across his face. After the situation cooled down a bit from this false start, I pleaded

with Carlene to forgive Johnny and to call a friend so the four of us could spend the evening together.

“For old time’s sake, Carlene, please,” I begged.

“Well, all right. I know a girl I can call.”

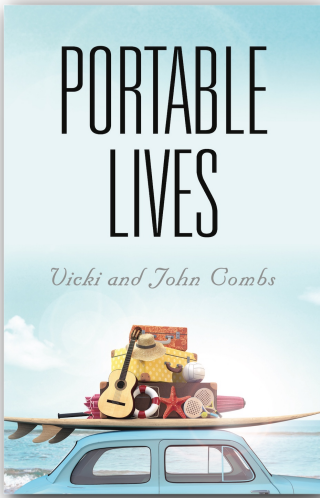
Hope returned. Maybe *this* would be my night of nights.

Carlene dialed her friend.

“Barbara, there are two idiots here who want to take us out tonight. One idiot is wearing pants soaked in tobacco juice, and the other one, an even bigger idiot, is wearing one blue sock and one green and white sock. They’re on a motorcycle, and I don’t think I want to go out with them. Do you?”

Rejected and dejected, we mounted our motorized Rosinante and wended our way home through the dark night.

*I derived information about Oklahomans in World War II and the number of veterans at Oklahoma A&M from the following sources: (<http://oklahomawwii.org>) and an article by Linda D. Wilson of the Oklahoma Historical Society at (<http://digitallibrary.okstate.edu/enclosed/entries/gi001.html>).



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