

*A collection of light-hearted true short stories about coming of age in Mississippi during the 1970s and 80s, mixed with historical events which shaped the author into adulthood, marriage, and parenting.*

## **Mississippi Musings: Stories of Life and Laughter**

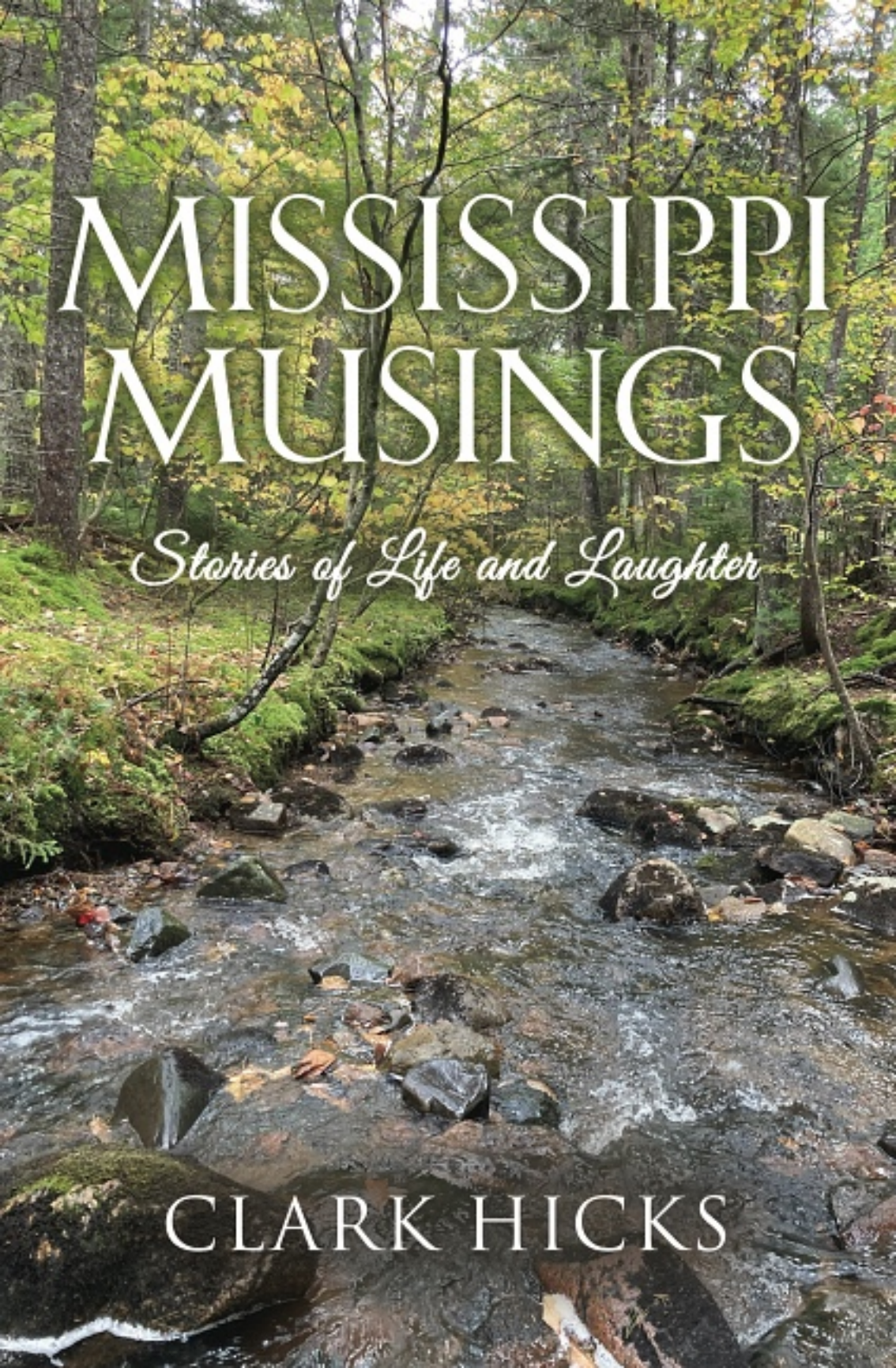
By Clark Hicks

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# MISSISSIPPI MUSINGS

*Stories of Life and Laughter*

CLARK HICKS

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## 126.

### **Kindness and a country store**

Southern hospitality is alive and well in Bassfield, Mississippi. A few weeks ago, my college buddies and I biked the Longleaf Trace and stopped by one of Mississippi's oldest operating country stores. The A.F. Carraway Store in Bassfield is a white clapboard-style building with a screened front door, century old wood floors, sky-high ceilings, and mammoth shelving filled with items for sale. Constructed in 1909, Mr. Carraway ran the business as an all-purpose general store, selling everything from hoop cheese to Round House overalls.

On our visit, we met Colleen Powell, the daughter of the late Neil Burns who ran the store for over sixty years. He had been hired by Mr. Carraway as a boy to help work in the store and later bought the business from the family. Colleen graciously told us of the history of the store which had been a gathering place for most of the local farmers.

One of the bike riders in our group operates a nonprofit farm in Massachusetts that donates all the vegetables and fruit grown to local food banks and pantries. Colleen was fascinated by the excellent work being done there, and she asked if she could make a donation. My friend was shocked at this suggestion. Anyone could see that the old country store in Bassfield did not turn a profit. Colleen mentioned that she and her brothers kept the store running for sentimental reasons, and they often donated their stock to needy people in the community. Our group spent no more than ten dollars on waters and snacks, and my Yankee friend stood mouth agape that this lovely woman wanted to give him, a stranger no less, money for his nonprofit farm. With tears in his eyes and a big hug, he accepted her offer, and she wrote him a check on the century old cash register still in use.

We spent a few more minutes touring the place, examining the old ice boxes, a historic butcher block, sewing machinery, and a cigarette-

stained massive counter full of stories and memories. Colleen made us feel welcome, even though we had never met, and she cheerfully said goodbye. Back on the Longleaf Trace, I suggested my Massachusetts friend look at the check. To his shock, Colleen had donated one hundred dollars!

Yes, our state has a troubled past, but through all the hardships, we have managed to remain generous, kind and welcoming to visitors. Based on the Christian call to minister to the needs of the poor, the outcast, and the needy, Southern culture espouses hospitality as one of its most foundational beliefs. Cheers to Colleen Powell. I hope you will drop by her old country store in Bassfield, step back in time, and ask for a tour.

127.

## The Farm

I have a tree farm in Greene County. Two hundred fifty acres of rolling hills, bogs, pitcher plants, loblolly and longleaf pines, dogwoods, beauty berries, gopher tortoises, whitetail deer, wild turkeys, coyotes, bobcats, and many other flora and fauna. The Farm, as I call it, is a respite from the grind of urban living with its constant deadlines and appointments and responsibilities. The Farm is untamed, verdant, quiet, unspoiled, and not burdened by time or other human devices. Above all, there is a sacredness flowing through the land, where family has lived, and laughed, and suffered and died. The Farm is perhaps a reflection of the arc of life for all living organisms, plants and animals. Even more, the land bestows a shimmer of the dawn of creation, when life first burst forth with abounding energy and hope. The wind regularly hums through the trees. Insects flick and buzz all around. The morning dew blankets the ground. Night falls and the heavens explode with millions of stars exposing all the constellations and planets and the hazy Milky Way. Coyote packs howl in the night, owls hoot their territorial disputes before sleep, and whip-poor-wills sound their mating call to one another.

The Farm has no running water, no electricity, and none of the modern conveniences which drown out the rawness of nature. This is by design. Our shelter is an old cabin with bunks and chairs and a fire pit. At The Farm, friends and family sit on the porch, share stories, and occasionally engage in uncontrolled laughter. Sitting around a warm fire and watching the embers float away, there is a moment of imagination that this scene is not unlike what early mankind saw and experienced hundreds of thousands of years ago. Our sense of self-importance is lost against the breadth and backdrop of the vast universe breathing through the sky and forest. God's power, mystery, and awe are manifest best on a cold, still night where the celestial bodies



consume our tiny perch on planet Earth. God, our Creator, is found in every sight and sound which envelopes the body and then the soul. I wish every human being could have the unforgettable experience of being swallowed by nature, feel the danger and the doubt, the bewilderment, astonishment, and euphoria, all infused together at once. We are alone and not alone. A mere speck of sand and God's chosen. One brief heartbeat in the universe and a precious lifetime of unique memories.

The fact that God bestowed man as the caregiver of this planet is undeniable. Our free will to conserve and preserve or destroy and pollute is within our control.

Nature is meant to be enjoyed, even if it's cold or hot or wet or dusty. My sons, Harrison and Luke, often tell stories of their memories about The Farm, like when Luke stumbled upon a large adult gopher tortoise and decided to name her Sally with a Sharpie pen written on her undershell. He let her crawl into her underground tunnel never to be seen again. Or, when Harrison walked up on an unsuspecting blue heron sunbathing in our stream called Indian Creek. The large bird suddenly flapped his enormous wings in flight causing Harrison to similarly jump nearly as high from sheer startlement.

On my little patch of soil, I can be still, meditative, and thankful for all God's gifts of life, the good and the bad, the happy and the sad, all that makes life - life. As long as I live, I pray that I always respect, protect, and nurture my plot of land with boundaries drawn only by man. The land is not mine anyway, just on loan from God. And with this temporary management, I will strive to be a proper steward of the trees, the wildlife, and the soil from which we all came and shall return. My hope is that you will too be mindful of the air we breathe, the water we drink, and all of God's creation.

*Clark Hicks*

Nature is filled with surprises and wonder. God's grand design is fixed and ever-changing. The famous American naturalist John Muir once said that in every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks. I have found that to be true at The Farm and for that gift in life, I say with joy, thanks be to God.



## 128.

### Get off my lawn

Thirty years ago, my wife and I found a small rental home on Eddy Street in Hattiesburg. Thrilled to have our first yard, I planted a small maple tree near the driveway, and promptly received a phone call from the landlord telling me to dig it up. We removed the tree and ourselves from the property and decided to buy a home.

We bought our first house in Oak Grove, a subdivision called Forrest Hills, and immediately christened the place by planting a tree, in memory of our sour short-lived landlord. We met our friendly neighbors, but one kept calling me “Kent,” apparently confusing my name “Clark” with the comic book alter ego of Superman.

The Lamar County residence abutted thick forests, and early one crisp morning, I heard a rifle blast. Opening day of deer season was upon us, and when I mentioned this experience to the former Lamar County Chancery Clerk, Wayne Smith, he said that shot may have been him in a nearby deer stand. You gotta love Lamar County!

Our first son was born in that home, and we have many fond memories. He learned to walk there and would hold on to the entertainment center in his diapers while bobbing up and down to the beat of the music. One sunny Saturday, I decided to detail my truck and removed the baby car seat, propping it against the wall of the garage. That seemed a perfect spot for my son to sit, so I carefully lowered him in the seat, but unbuckled. Unfortunately, he had learned to master leaning forward, at which time he fell out of his seat and tumbled end over end down the steep driveway. I caught him mid-roll and later caught extreme heat from the rolling eyes of his loving mom.

A few years later, we moved to Hattiesburg on a street called Southampton Road. We had several kind neighbors who built their

homes and raised their children on that street. The location was ideal. We walked to church and to Southern Miss games, often hearing The Pride of Mississippi marching band during football season. We planted more trees, and our second child was born. I loved to garden, and my oldest would watch me clean out old flower beds. He was so proud of his dad that he told our friends, “My daddy is a lawyer. He pulls weeds!”

With a growing family, we made our final and third home purchase in 2003, a home in southwest Hattiesburg near Thames Elementary School. Not long after we added some fresh paint and did minor remodeling, Hurricane Katrina visited and dropped a few trees on the roof. Fortunately, the damage was limited to the roof and yard, and over time, we turned the house into our dream home. One bonus, at least for us, is that our street is Trick or Treat Central Station. We delight in seeing hundreds of costumed children and adults walking to our front door for Halloween candy. It’s also an excuse to eat leftover candy well into November!

Our sons are now grown and living elsewhere. I hope that today we are the same type neighbors we encountered as a young couple living on Southampton Road. We are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves, right? I refuse to be the grumpy man who says, “Get off my lawn!” But I must confess, if I see one more eight-year-old driving a golf cart on my street, I’m calling someone’s parents!

## 129.

### **Life is like a box of chocolates**

My nephew ate all my chocolates. We were living in our first home off Sandy Run Road in Oak Grove. My wife loved to decorate and arrange the home for visitors, especially family, and Benjamin was a special guest. The first child of my wife's siblings and first grandchild on either side of the family, we found a weekend for him to hang out with aunt and uncle. That boy was precocious, full of spit and vinegar, and he had a bottomless tummy. We planned the meals for his stay, mindful to keep things simple, and my wife filled several crystal bowls with Hershey's chocolates of all shapes, sizes, and flavors. The bowls were stationed in various rooms, each with thirty or more individually wrapped delights. They were so tempting in color and smell that I knew my nephew could not resist asking for a few bites. Once he arrived, it was only a matter of minutes until he noticed a bowl and stared longingly at the pile of sweet decadence. We gave him a milk chocolate and after supper, all shared a few more. I knew the child had a weakness for chocolate, but I was impressed by his self-control, until the next morning.

When I walked into our den, I saw that a late-night urge had taken over the youngster, and he had consumed half the bowl. Wrappers were strewn everywhere, and it looked like he had experienced an interlude of ravenous hunger. Disappointed, I gently scolded him, reminding the child that too much chocolate would make him sick. Even worse, his parents would be upset with him and his grown-up caregivers for allowing such gluttony. Benjamin protested and denied his mischievous ways, like any five-year-old would do, and we refilled the bowl with the clear understanding he would not eat any treats without express permission.

All went well until after dark when he once again sneaked into the dining room and ate the entire bowl of chocolates. My first reaction

was worry for his health, immediately followed by surprise that my wife's sister and husband raised a child with such impudence. My mind rushed with many emotions, and while Benjamin ate Sunday morning breakfast, my wife and I whispered in the adjacent room how we planned to discuss this crisis with the boy's parents. He needed intervention and faster than I ever imagined. I left him alone to play for fifteen minutes while I showered, a terrible mistake. In that time, the kid managed to invade every chocolate bowl in the house, leaving a trail of paper foil debris in his wake. Truly, I thought that we might have to rush Benjamin to the emergency room for a stomach pump.

We grabbed our little nephew and had him sit on the bed in our master bedroom while I went to my closet to get dressed. Then, in that instant, everything I believed blew up, like a watermelon meeting a baseball bat. On my closet floor, I saw fragments of coated paper. I managed to make out that the paper pieces were all that remained of a Snickers bar. A light bulb lit in my dense brain, and I remembered that I left a king-sized candy bar in the pocket of my hunting vest hanging on a rack. I checked the pocket, and there was no candy bar. Suspicious of the true offender, I examined the corner of my closet and discovered a giant rat nest filled with my candy bar remnants and wads of the debris from the many chocolates I thought my nephew had devoured. Yes, I had a problem on my hands, not of human origin, but of the rodent variety.

Needless to say, aunt and uncle had eggs on their faces and were quite embarrassed by our false accusations against an innocent child! We did not know what to do, though we agreed not to tell his parents. (Years later, we confessed.) With the weekend over, we loaded up Benjamin for the ride home, and realized we had bags of chocolate to remove from our vermin ridden home. We needed to eliminate a food source and evidence. In a logical and somewhat sinister move, we delivered my nephew and all our chocolates into the loving arms of his mom and dad, bragging that he had been the perfect guest the entire stay. It may be cliché but is so true when Forrest Gump famously said, "Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're gonna get."

## 130.

### I'm a sugarholic

I'm an addict. Hattiesburg is the epicenter of my dealers. The cartel has had many lords with names like Janusz, Robert, Martha, Zelaya, and JoAnna. They push their products on unsuspecting clientele and regular junkies. The names of the substances are an elixir, a lure to us hungry dependent fish. Mary Virginia, Humble Pie, Mangonada, the Binge, and Push Pops are sinister monikers to feed the habit. Once they have their hooks in us, the sudden rush happens. The skin gets tingly, the eyes widen, and a euphoria envelopes body and mind. The sickening pleasure is fleeting yet so transformative that we want more and more.

The demand outpaces supply, and the cartel's lieutenants are feverishly working 24/7 trying their best to not sample the goods. That is cause for immediate termination and likely relegation to the hordes of users and freaks controlled by a cabal of traffickers. We don't need the fix, we want it, and that is more important. When the urge is satisfied, and a calm enters, there is only one desire. Crash. Hit the nearest soft spot, go prone, close your eyes, and drift away into another world where dreams come true. Awakened, we fool ourselves. That will never happen again, we say. Eat a snack. Drink some water. Go to work. Don't think about what you want to think about. Exercise is not a counterpoint. Burning calories clears the mind. And stimulates the hunger. Oh, what will one little taste do? The disgusting and humiliating cycle of denial, deceit, self-loathing, and delight.

All the while the dealers' falcons are floating in and out of our churches, places of work, and homes. They are moms, grandfathers, and even children. Shamelessly hawking their merchandise for consumption, offering free samples and even menus. Everywhere we turn, the colors, shapes, and aromas are enticing. Donuts, cookies, cakes, and exotic pastries. Sweets so sugary and delectable that resistance is impossible. Acceptance is inevitable.

Hattiesburg is a haven for delicious desserts. Our bakeries are first class and known far and wide. Zelaya's, Jody's, and Loblolly are some of my Midtown favorites. For cake balls, I'm a regular at T-Bones. The Berry "Burg" Chantilly cake at Corner Market is known nationwide and succulent. In this year's Mardi Gras season, I overdosed twice on Loblolly's king cakes and enjoyed every moment. And yes, Martha and Robert nailed it.

Moderation with my sugar addiction is not in my equation right now. I'm a fructose, glucose maniac. I do not discriminate. If it's sweet, I will partake. You might be like me. If so, feel free to join my ad hoc SA meeting. Hi, my name is Clark. I'm a sugarholic.



## 131.

### The eccentric aunt

My wife's family is originally from the land of volcanoes, a small tropical Central American country named El Salvador. Last week, her maternal aunt passed away peacefully at Asbury House in Hattiesburg, where she received excellent care.

Tia, as we called her, was a sweet, diminutive lady who immigrated to the U.S. decades ago. She never married, had no children, and in her later years, moved from New Orleans to McComb where she worked in the doctor's office of her brother-in law, my wife's father. Tia and her sister, my wife's mother, were close but had quite different personalities. Tia was unconventional and told colorful stories in Spanish and English that inevitably made us smile and laugh. In her memory, I will share a few stories about Tia.

Christmas was a big event in my wife's family. For many years, Tia lived with my wife's parents. Devout Catholics, the three of them annually invited family and friends for Christmas dinner at their Pike County home. As custom, my in-laws greeted each arriving guest with big warm hugs. Tia was a night owl, who slept well past noon and needed hours after awakening to make herself presentable to guests. As a result, she often made her grand appearance well after all the guests arrived, entering with the slow walk of a royal princess. She hugged and kissed each visitor one by one, gripped their arms, and earnestly told a random story out of context or nonsensical. All one could do was listen, smile, and nod back at her, later pondering what just happened. But she had a soft grace about her as she flitted among guests in her cheerful Christmas themed sweaters.

Kathia's mother customarily prepared Salvadoran turkey and gravy and other native delights with amazing aromas. Tia wanted to contribute, so she was assigned the annual task of preparing one side dish. Without

fail, she created unique and original mishmashes of foods, though sometimes odd-looking and once foul smelling from the addition of marine mollusks known as cuttlefish. Usually, we were served a salad concoction, different each time, and never based on a recipe. The family quietly and nervously watched with uncertainty as she assembled the dishes, never knowing if her leafy inventions hit or grossly missed the tasty mark. We always ate what she made. If her Christmas green offering was a disaster, we softly praised her culinary work while forcing a few swallows.

Around the ornate dinner table, the family engaged in lively discussions, often interrupted by Tia's contribution of an unrelated and puzzling comment, like the time she espoused views on her belief in extraterrestrials. We all looked at one another perplexed when Tia routinely went "conversation rogue," and one of us steered back on topic with Tia slowly chewing her beyond compare romaine fare.

After Christmas dinners, Tia slipped away to feed scraps to a bilingual and split personality dog. The neighbor owned the dog named Dixie, but that Southern belle wandered next door by night and transformed into her new persona - Cutie, the Latin beauty, responding to commands in Spanish with ease.

Tia always presented each family member with a Christmas gift, something she selected without input from anyone. Her gifts often were pricey, but not necessarily on point, like the time she bought my son a bright pink backpack for college. After exchanging presents, everyone remained gathered in the great room for fellowship and occasional dancing. Kathia's mom once stood shocked and aghast, but also amused, as Tia used a towel as a shawl to swish to and fro in flamenco style movements.

We loved Tia, eccentricities and all. She lived a simple life, was kind, well-mannered on a professional level, and did no harm to anyone. Every family deserves someone like her, an amazing storyteller and master chef of Christmas salad extraordinaire.

## 132.

### Pro wrestler takedown

In an old Yazoo County courtroom, I somehow managed to defeat a professional wrestler. I represented K&B, a New Orleans based pharmacy with drug store chains across Mississippi. My connection to that company ran deep, as my hometown of McComb had a K&B on the main drag, Delaware Avenue. I bought my first girlfriend a bronze plated eagle necklace at K&B, and for a seventh grader, twelve bucks amounted to a full piggy bank. My friend's dad worked as a pharmacist there, and one year, my family made me a birthday hat using the store's iconic purple paper bags. Years later as an attorney, I jumped at the opportunity to defend K&B across Mississippi and gave it my all before they sold out to Rite Aid.

The Yazoo County lawsuit presented a tough case to defend. The person suing the store claimed a severe eye injury, corneal trauma, caused by a falling aisle sign. He had entered the store to pick up a prescription, and I'm sure this imposing guy with a spray tan turned a few heads. He regularly traveled in a minor league pro wrestling circuit and clearly lifted weights for hours every day. According to him, the plastic sign slipped from its eye hook on one end, swung down, and caught his eyeball in stride, tearing the cornea as he walked to the cash register. This story seemed fishy to me. He was no Dusty Rhodes or Ric Flair, but I suspected he had been schooled in the art of athletic theater. So, I devised a plan of defense. At his sworn deposition, I asked Mr. Muscles his height, then afterwards went to the store and measured the lowest distance to the floor of a partially unhooked aisle sign. This gladiator probably scratched his eye in a piledriver stunt, a clothesline move, or an illegal eye poke in the ring. Sure enough, his first documentation of an eye injury occurred the Monday following a weekend cage match in Louisiana. In the 1990s, companies were less afraid to go to trial, and despite the suspicious circumstances, this lawsuit had risk. The up-and-coming young wrestler alleged that the K&B mishap likely ruined his

supposed potentially lucrative wrestling career. Truth is that a wrestler needs both eyes to see the sleeper hold technique coming at him.

The day of the trial arrived, and twelve jurors were seated in the box. The wrestler told his tragic story with earnest and almost shed a tear when speaking of his lost dream of WWF fame. I waited for my turn and slowly walked to the podium for dramatic effect. I first asked him to tell me his height. He looked at me quizzically and said, “six feet, two inches.” Then, with more pizzazz, I pulled out an enlarged photo of the scene with a measuring tape in the picture demonstrating that the distance from the corner of the sign to the floor measured six feet, four inches. In that moment, the wrestler looked like he had been caught stealing cookies from a cookie jar. He tried to compose himself and muttered that he had worn cowboy boots that day. I then tried to channel my best Clarence Darrow. (Google him if you are under 50.) Eyebrows raised, peering at the jury, these words with sarcastic emphasis were spoken. “Are you telling this jury that you were jacked up on cowboy boots?!” Three or four jurors tried to contain their laughter, and one accidentally spit through her closed mouth, more likely giggling at me not him. The judge even lowered her head for a moment, and so I knew for sure this questioning hit the mark. The wrestler wanted to suplex me, and I did not blame him.

The jury unanimously ruled in favor of K&B at the trial’s end, and I hurriedly grabbed my briefcase and drove home to Hattiesburg. Trial experiences are slowly becoming a relic today. Civil jury trials are in significant decline in Mississippi and the nation, a skill of a bygone era, due to the push for out of court settlements. Corporations believe the delay and expense of lawsuits no longer merit trials except in the rarest of cases. For me, I love persuasion and performance, like my wrestling opponent. One day years ago in a Yazoo County courtroom, I luckily scored a takedown of a pro wrestler and for icing on the cake, I did so without even wearing spandex.

## 133.

### Saved by Stuckey's

That Saturday morning began like an ordinary weekend day. I prepared for a relaxing, pleasant bike ride, gathered my gear, checked my tire pressure, and grabbed a light snack and water. The Corner Market grocery parking lot on 28th Ave. and Lincoln Road served as the starting point for our group of cycling enthusiasts ready to pedal through Hattiesburg to the Longleaf Trace. On this occasion, a few strangers joined us, out of town semi-pros itching to set a higher pace. Sure enough, when we entered the Trace, they formed a single line and began increasing speed to a heart-pounding level.

Pride or stupidity seized me that day, and I refused to be dropped by the pack. They had grand designs. Rather than the usual 25-mile ride, one rider mentioned plans to veer toward Rawls Springs and complete a 50-miler. I had insufficient food or water for that distance. Fortunately, my chain dropped off the crank set, and I had my excuse to stop and make a quick repair while the other riders journeyed on out of sight. One of the cyclists decided to stop and help me with the repair. We resumed a much slower ride, and he began to talk and talk and talk. He told me about his ex-wife, an overbearing boss, the weather, and his take on the stock market. I felt obligated to speak back, which became quite difficult in the hilly terrain. After thirty minutes of his incessant chatter and my breathlessness, I longed to rejoin the fast riders. So, with some guilt, I slowly increased my speed and eventually left behind the overly conversational rider. All alone on the road again, I heard a pop and hit the brakes, realizing my front tire had a flat. More worried about Mr. Chatty approaching from behind, I jumped behind a bush, bike and all, as the unaware fellow passed by me and meandered down the road. My tire patch kit bought me the time I needed to fix the flat and hopefully avoid a reunion with a certain biker.

With the tire patched and the coast clear, I resumed the ride. To my surprise, a mile down the road, all the riders had stopped to rest on picnic tables under a shade tree. In their group sat my Good Samaritan acquaintance. Reunion. No sooner had I stopped, all were ready to roll except my recent companion. Did I go with the fast group or rest longer in isolation with the endless communicator? I chose to ride, with no rest, no more food, and little water. My legs burned, and my lungs almost burst. I spent every ounce of energy as we rolled through Rawls Springs and reached Highway 49 to cross over to Pep's Point. Then, it happened. I bonked, the term when a cyclist loses all energy, drained and devoid of anything in the tank. Watching the group forge ahead, I stepped off the bike, walked on the shoulder of the highway, then hopped back on the seat and glided down the long hill to Stuckey's. I bought bottled water, a snack to refuel, and called Mom for a car ride home, all before resting on the store sidewalk. But then, out of the corner of my eye, here he came down the hill on his bike, waving and smiling, ready for more conversation. Not again. I could not shake the guy. Mustering untapped inner strength, I hurried into the store and hid behind a stack of pecan log rolls, overcome with shame and humiliation. (Mom taught me better!) I never saw the man again, and he never saw me inside Stuckey's.

Stuckey's had an old slogan which proclaimed that all visitors are met with Sweet Southern Goodness. I did not return the greeting to them that day when I limped into the parking lot. Saddled with glucose deficiency, dehydration, and relentless gabbing from an unknown companion, I wanted food, water, and solitude. At that moment, an American gas stop chain known for taffy and hot biscuits came to the rescue. Stuckey's quenched my thirst, recharged my body, and provided a safe hiding place. In my book, that's life saving.



## 134.

### The Haunting

My wife and I lived in a haunted house on a quiet street in Hattiesburg.

The eerie sounds from another dimension began on a warm summer evening shortly after Karen, our house sitter, climbed into bed in the upstairs guest bedroom. The soft hum of the air conditioner combined with her deep relaxing breaths made Karen's eyelids heavy and sleep imminent. On the verge of entering a dream, a loud knock startled her awake. All alone in the house, she wondered whether her mind had played tricks on her. Her half-asleep and half-awake state, Karen knew, often mixed dreams with reality. Heart beating fast, she laid motionless, squeezed the sheets tight, eyes wide open, and listened intently for any other sounds. None came. Until two hours later. Sound asleep by then, footsteps outside the room awakened her with terror. The steps were followed by a ringing sound which convinced her that someone or something had joined her on the second floor. Karen jumped out of bed, turned on the light, and walked into the hallway to encounter nothing. No one. She softly and nervously said, "Who's there?" No response. Only deafening dead silence. Groggy and gripped with fear, our house sitter began to rationalize her situation. She first checked every room and closet. Nothing. This investigation ruled out the possibility a living person might be hiding somewhere. The family pets were not roaming free. One dog shivered in the bed with her and barked warnings at an imaginary intruder. The other dog snored in her closed kennel downstairs. The noises she heard were undoubtedly feet, walking slowly, methodically, and precisely. Karen tried to deny her suspicions but could not stop thinking the unthinkable. Could these sounds be a spirit from beyond, a lost soul floating between worlds, reaching out to her for help? If so, a 911 call to the police would not protect the living or the dead.

In the middle of the night with no earthly answer, Karen's imagination ran wild and hit overload. She decided to act and turned on the adjacent bathroom light, sat up in bed, and trained her hearing for the faintest of audible signals. In a drowsy stupor, her thoughts wandered to apparitions, voices, and floating objects. She worried lights might flicker, or her doorknob would slowly turn and then violently wiggle. Minutes turned to hours and eventually, her bleary eyes saw the dawn's sunrise. Our poor sitter never slept but survived the haunting, at least for one night.

When my wife and I arrived home from out of town, Karen made a fiery and loud announcement. She would never again stay overnight because we had a guest of the ghostly variety. Perplexed, I assumed she heard typical old house creaks. For me, I heard rantings of an insomniac. My wife, on the other hand, heard a firsthand poltergeist experience. Without my knowledge, she stayed awake the first night of our return and promptly shook me awake when she too heard rumblings upstairs. My betrothed is apt to believe that spirits walk among us, and in her opinion, we needed a Ghostbuster fast. So, I grabbed my high-powered flashlight and investigated, creeping up the stairs slowly and quietly to search high and low for the origin of the sounds. I almost gave up but decided to examine a tight space in a storage area of our unfinished attic. Then, in an instant, the culprits revealed themselves in my bright beam. Calmly and gently enjoying puffy insulation, they stared back with dark beady eyes, pointy pink noses, and long whiskers. A family of marsupials commonly known as opossums had decided to squat in our house. Cuddly and cute-looking, harmless and shy, these creatures convinced two grown women that mischievous spirits were camped out in our residence.

I must confess, I briefly wondered if we might need to sell the house and, if so, disclose the supernatural condition of the property. Fortunately, our visitors were only small mammals, and we were not in need of a paranormal exterminator. So, we decided to let the little critters stay awhile, and they eventually moved elsewhere once their babies could survive on their own. We chuckle every now and then

remembering when we thought the dead were roaming aimlessly upstairs. Turns out, our temporary living visitors were only playing possum.

## 135.

### **Grief and hope for a suffering child**

I have waited more than five years to publicly share a personal story of fear, grief, hope, and thankfulness. The love for a child is unlike any other. Most parents would not hesitate to do whatever is necessary to protect a child from harm or suffering. If you were asked to give your life to save your child, I suspect most of you would accept the trade. This unbreakable, indescribable bond between parent and child is often unconditional and eternal.

My wife and I hoped and prayed our young children would avoid life's hardships before adulthood. Unfortunately, that did not happen. In 2018, my oldest son came home from playing basketball and said his feet were tingling and numb. The next day, the condition worsened, and we went to the emergency room at Forrest General Hospital. Tests were run with normal results, but after going home, my son noticed weakness in his legs. Luckily, I knew the symptoms might warrant a neurological assessment, so I called Wendell Helveston, a local neurologist. Over the phone, I described the onset of symptoms and mentioned our son first had an upset stomach following consumption of undercooked chicken. Helveston, who we consider a hero, immediately suspected an autoimmune disorder called Guillain Barre Syndrome. He told us to go straight to his office, and while there, our son developed rapid, ascending paralysis in his body. One side of his mouth suddenly drooped like a stroke, followed by the other. Helveston calmly told us that our son was about to be extremely sick within hours, totally paralyzed, that he might need help breathing, but with certain infusions, he would slowly improve. Sure enough, by day's end, our child was in the ICU, with no movement of his body, but thanks to the quick diagnosis, infusions were immediately started, and a breathing machine avoided.

This was a very dark time for us. Words cannot express the fear, anxiety, and tears shed. He went by ambulance to Oschner's Hospital in New Orleans where a team of doctors surrounded him, and nurses inserted more tubes and added more medical devices. Our son never complained, but when he whispered to me that he thought he was dying, all I could do was cry in sorrow and pain for my suffering child. Days turned into weeks and months with gradual improvement and rehab to learn to walk, eat, and talk. But, just as Dr. Helveston said, he improved, re-enrolled in college after a semester layoff, graduated college on time, and then entered and graduated medical school. Dr. Harrison Hicks is now in his residency at UMMC in Jackson. He has minor neurological deficits, gets tired more easily, but he does not complain. He is alive and healthy. His Mom and Dad are grateful to have witnessed medical experts save what felt like a drowning child while helpless parents watched.

Some parents are not so fortunate and bear their losses with them each day. I do not wish on anyone the pain of a suffering child or even worse, losing one. Our experience changed us. We realize more the gift of parenthood. We deeply value the relationships with our two sons and never decline a chance to see them despite their busy schedules. If you are grieving a suffering child, you are not alone. There is hope and light at the end of the tunnel. You will receive unimaginable blessings during your difficult journey. We certainly did. May God give you strength and courage in your darkest moments of despair and grief. Amen.

## 136.

### **The nest is empty, but our lives are full**

I do not feel old enough to be entering the “empty nest” phase of life. But I am. The reality is here. Time has not stopped for me. I am not an exception. Our children have flown the coop, jumped ship, and stepped out into an exciting and equally beautiful and dangerous world. If you love someone, set them free, right? No. That’s not how I roll right now. But I will have to grudgingly accept it. The train has left the station, carrying my two children to faraway places.

Twenty-six years ago, my wife gave birth to son number one. Almost four years later, son number two entered our solar system. Having children, for us, meant a redirection of all energy and purpose. Everything, and I mean everything, revolved around their welfare, safety, and growth. Helicopter parents? On occasion. But I would never trade being overprotective with not devoting meaningful time and energy to my kids. From cradle to college, they have known nothing but love, not just from parents, but from Pop, Nana, Mami, Papi, a caring Catholic school, and a deeply spiritual church.

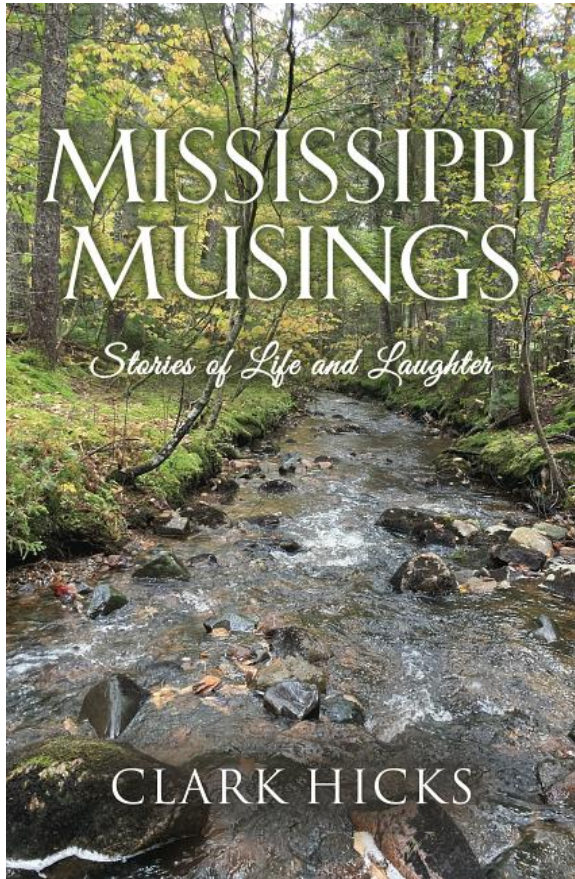
Our children have experienced the confusing cruelty of life, from the loss of grandparents to suffering a serious life-altering illness. They have lived through a catastrophic hurricane and a history making pandemic, where more than 170,000 Americans lost their lives. Both sons graduated during COVID-19, one through a “virtual” experience, and the other with a mask and socially distanced.

Through the years, we were fortunate enough to travel and see much of our country and its wonders, from mountains to oceans and all the landscapes in between. My wife and I learned quite a bit too. For instance, Tik Tok is admittedly entertaining, and Fortnite is so much more than 14 days! (For you old folks, Fortnite is a massively popular video game.)

Our sons are becoming men. Did I just write that sentence?! No more clothes on the floor in every room, as if they just fell off while walking. No more half-consumed water bottles throughout the house. No more mud, mud, mud. No more toothpaste with missing caps or toilet paper rolls without toilet paper. No more grocery shopping every day and wondering, how do they eat so much food? No more selfies or Snapchats every five seconds. No more, “Go to bed!” I could go on, but I suspect many of you can relate.

The house is about to be quiet and clean again. Fewer clothes to wash, less food to cook, and no more trying to figure out how that dirty sock ended up on the lampshade. My wife and I were far from perfect. We tried to be good role models and establish a strong moral foundation for our sons. We made clear our expectations and will be there when they call. And, with iPhones, they better answer our calls!

This moment is bittersweet, without a doubt. We are proud, a little anxious, but hopeful. The circle of life continues, and our boys are flapping their wings. The nest is empty, but our lives are full.



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