

During difficult times and lack of material possessions, humor is still present. Sharing this humor is what this book is about. The book is not about surviving these tough times. But rather seeing the humor during these times.

Down the Hill and Across the Road

by James Gray

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The background of the book cover is a photograph of a winter scene. A road, partially covered in snow and ice, winds through a landscape of bare, dark trees. The sky is a mix of deep blue and vibrant orange-red, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is quiet and atmospheric.

TWENTY-FIVE SHORT STORIES
that will arouse your imagination, tickle
your funny bone and maybe bring a
tear to your eye.

DOWN
THE HILL
AND ACROSS
THE ROAD

James Gray

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Table Utensils

Being a member of a large family with a very limited income drives one to become innovative and creative. We did not have a complete set of anything when it came to table service. There were never two plates that matched when our table was set. In fact it was possible at certain times for someone to end up eating out of a metal pie pan. The drinking utensils at a certain time of year could become very scarce. Let me explain how that worked. For the most part our drinking containers were pint mason jars. We only had a certain number of these jars. Since these jars were also used for canning fruits, vegetables, jams and jelly the number left for use as drinking glasses began to dwindle toward the fall of the year. By the time October came around it was common for two children to have to drink from the same jar. This could cause discussions and arguments with warnings of “Don’t put your mouth on my side of the jar,” or “We have to take turns drinking”. I watched all this and thought, there has to be a better way. I knew there was no possibility of purchasing drinking glasses. My Mother always said “You have to make do with what you have.” Well, I didn’t have anything to make do with! So, I knew if I was going to do something I had to come up with something to make do with.

When I was nine and a half years old with no money, I said to myself all I have is exceptionally good looks, very high intelligence, and a wonderful sense of humor. None of these will buy drinking glasses. I thought! What do other families do? They don’t can their food in mason

jars they buy it already in a metal can and then throw the can away. That's it! They don't use those cans, they just throw them away. I know where they throw those cans. We lived close to the abandoned lead and zinc mines and this was where the people from town threw away their trash. Saturday was the most common day for the town people to come and throw away their trash. So, Saturday about 10:A.M. armed with a tow sack (burlap bag) I headed off to the mines. It was illegal to dump trash in that area. People knew that if they dumped trash there it was illegal. I would have to stay out of sight or they would not stop. I threw my tow sack over a low limb on an oak tree and then climbed high in the tree. I waited. I did not want to get cans that had been laying there for a time. I wanted cans with no rust and no dents. I was hoping they would throw away cans today. I thought maybe I will have to come back tomorrow. I thought it would be neat if I can get cans of different sizes. As I sat high in that tree many thoughts went through my mind. I would have to come up with a plan to clean the cans so they would be safe to drink from. I had been studying Louis Pasteur and how he used heating to kill bacteria. I would figure out how to do that. Interrupting my thoughts a car pulled up to the gravel pile. The driver jumped out and opened the trunk quickly he grabbed two bags out of the trunk and threw them at the base of the gravel pile. As he sped away I started down from my perch in the tree. I stopped as I saw another car approaching. The car drove in and a large woman got out. She walked over to where the two bags of trash had just been deposited. She kicked one of the bags and shook her head. I thought well, she

must not be looking for cans. She walked around for awhile and then got back into her car. She just sat there in her car. I thought, come on lady leave. Then a pickup with scrap boards in the back drove in. The lady got out of her car and talked to the driver of the pickup. The pickup drove around behind the gravel pile. The fat lady followed the pickup. I couldn't see what was going on behind the gravel pile. In a few minutes the pickup came from behind the gravel pile, the fat lady was following on foot. The scrap boards were gone from the back of the pickup. So, that's what they were up to, dumping scrap lumber. Then both the car and pickup left.

I stayed in the tree for a good while. I came down from my perch in the tree and looked through the contents of the two bags and poked around looking for more cans. That Saturday I got five cans that were suitable for my project. I needed more cans to have enough to give everyone their own can. It took me two more Saturdays to complete my mission. I washed the cans in hot soapy water. I checked the top rim of each can for burrs that might cut someone's lip. Using a piece of pipe and a ball pen hammer I hammered each burr down until the top rim was nice and smooth. I decided to use Pasteur's method of sterilizing the cans with heat. I used the cast iron kettle that we had set up on three vertical pieces of pipe. I filled the pot with water and got a hot fire going underneath. I put the cans in the water brought it to a boil and boiled the cans for about half an hour. This removed any and all evidence of any foreign matter, paper labels and glue.

I brought the cans in the house and all my brothers and sisters gathered around the table where I had placed

the cans. I said, "Here is the way we will work this. Starting with the youngest you will each choose the can you want." As each one chose their can I took a sharp 16 penny nail and scribed their name on the bottom of their can. Problem solved!

My memory recalls nothing so inviting as a nice clean shiny can filled with very cold raw milk.

Gas in the One Room School House.

All my life I have had a problem with gas not the belching kind but out the other end. I ate the same things my brothers and sisters ate. Evidently my system processed food in way that I developed gas. It made life somewhat difficult especially for a kid. When I felt it coming on I would find an appropriate place away from others to release it with little or no notice. However, that was not possible in every situation. Especially when sitting inside a one room school building.

The first eight grades of school I attended a one room country school in the Missouri Ozarks. The name of the school was Mineral Point.

Mineral Point School where I attended sat on a hill. The school building faced to the east. It sat on a high foundation which made the school building two feet off the ground. On the south side of the foundation there was an opening about eighteen inches square to allow one to enter. We called the opening in the foundation the door to the crawl space. Most of the time the opening was covered by a tight fitting wooden cover, which could be removed to get under the school house for what ever reason. Sometimes we would take the cover off and go under the school. It was really dark under there, so we never went too far.

When I was in seventh grade at Mineral Point School after I had eaten my lunch I had a bad gas attack. So severe that it caused me to break out in a sweat. The more I tried to hold it in the worse it got. I held my butt cheeks together as tight as I could. I could feel the sweat running

down my back into my crack. I grabbed both sides of my desk seat and pressed myself down on the seat as tight as my strength would allow. It was getting worse. Fact is I was in terrible pain. I realized I would not be able to make it till afternoon recess. I thought maybe I could lean over to one side and release it a little at a time quietly. As I leaned over to my right the gas started coming out in force. The first was a very loud! It was sort of an underwater hissing sound which was followed by a very high pitched screeching noise that became a rolling thunder like sound that one might hear during a spring thunder storm. Then a very loud clap as though lightening had struck the well pump out front of the school house.

The whole school went into panic mode. Everyone was terrified.

The teacher leaped from behind her desk with clinched fists held shoulder high facing the front door her upper lip curled and a snarling sound coming from way down in her throat ready to defend her students from any monster that might burst through the front door.

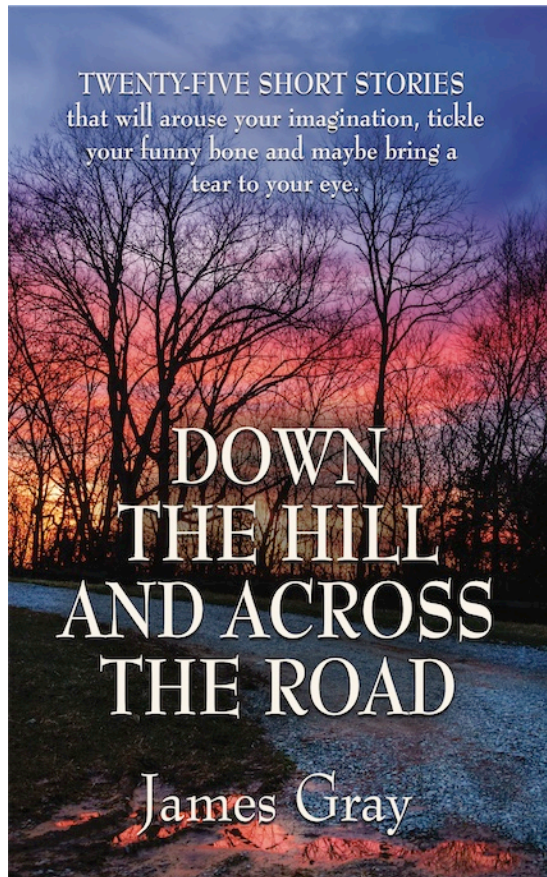
A seventh grade girl jumped up and rushed to the blackboard and grabbed a piece of chalk and was writing her spelling words on the blackboard as fast as she could.

A Catholic girl who had just finished her Catechism two weeks before was looking straight up at the ceiling as she crossed herself repeatedly. Donnie slumped over his desk as if he had been shot. Charles bit the eraser off the end of his new Ever Sharp pencil. Howard jumped up, shouted a string of cuss words and threw his history book toward the blackboard. The book ricocheted off the

blackboard making a weird sound as it skidded across the key board on the piano. Tommy wadded his Big Chief tablet up into a ball that would fit in the palm of his hand....yeah the whole tablet. Carroll stabbed herself in the leg with a freshly sharpened #2 lead pencil. The first graders were clutching their desk until their knuckles turned white too scared to cry with eyes as big as silver dollars. Bobby Joe swallowed a red colored crayon he had been chewing on. Tammy jumped from her desk and sit cross legged on the floor reciting verse four of psalm twenty-three with her hands over her eyes. Ray stood up on the seat of his desk and put his hands on top of his head with tears running down his cheeks not making a sound. One fifth grade boy was sitting with his head down red faced trying to hold back the laughter like a pipe bomb ready to explode. I am sure my younger siblings were thinkingyeah Jim had gas again. The rest of the students were sitting hands palm down on their desks wide eyed looking straight ahead like stone statues.

Then everything became deathly quite. It seemed that everyone held their position for several minutes. The teacher relaxed her position and said, "You boys have left that cover off of the crawl space and cats or something is fighting under the school house."

Yeah, that day there was gas at Mineral Point School!!



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