

# Allegiance

I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE to Rockhouse Creek in Letcher County, however far I roam. I pledge to always visit my family's graves, brother, mother, father, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, scattered in the hills. I will always drive the old roads I traveled in my youth and still travel every chance I get, especially Route 7 from Jeff to Sandy Hook, through old coal camps and towns like Wayland where our football team in 1952 played a pretty good game even though we lost. I pledge allegiance to Highway 119 across Letcher County and into Harlan town to meet Highway 421, which goes south across Black Mountain to Lee County, Virginia, and Route 58 through Powell Valley to Cumberland Gap. I pledge allegiance to Cudjo's Cave in the saddle of the Gap, to the huge stalactite deep inside the cave that's been hanging from a high vaulted ceiling for eighty million years. And to the memories of former times and local places—world of two-lane roads and single-lane bridges, certain curves and intersections and mere spots by the road where significant things happened, the curve where my brother died, the spot by the small bridge over Cane Creek where I stood with my father as we waited for the bus that would take him back to the VA hospital, the last time I saw him alive, I pledge allegiance. And to the little roadside stores where you could buy a baloney sandwich and a dope for twenty cents, the people in the stores talking easily,

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laughing, catching up on each other's news; then walking along the railroad tracks, carrying their groceries home, the smell of coal smoke in the air, children scrambling around the hillsides, finding old house foundations, stone chimneys standing lonely in a field, rusted bedsprings in the weeds, old mining works, old slate dumps, forgotten hillside cemeteries overgrown by kudzu vines, the daily life of the coal camps, men walking up the holler, going to work, carrying their dinner buckets under their arms, graceful in their walking; all day the loaded coal gons rolling away from the tippie, forty gons in a train, thick black smoke, steam clouds and ashes blowing back from the engine, coal-fired boilers turning the water to steam, and down the line, passing kids playing on the riverbank who wave at the engineers, then in the rain walk across the trestle above the swollen river, water pouring out of the ground of every holler and hillside, branches, creeks, rivers filled with life forms, minners, tadpoles, mussels, crawdads, snake doctors, edible fish, edible frogs, clean sandy beaches along the riverbanks as late as 1955, people splashing in the swimming holes, sitting on quilts on the sand eating their picnics, resting. Now in the twenty-first century the rivers are dirty but I still pledge allegiance to them, and to all who work to get them clean again and stop the nest fouling. People are the only creatures who foul their own nests, garbage, sewage, mountaintop removal mining. Animals know better. I pledge allegiance to the animals, and to the trees, remnants of the ancient hardwood forests, ten thousand years in the making, that covered eastern America, and in one century it was all destroyed. I pledge allegiance to the old Indians who were native to this land until the Euros, my ancestors among them, destroyed them in their millions. I honor the native peoples. I honor those in the mountain region who have chronicled the history, made us know

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what happened, the good and the bad. And all praise to those who, across the generations, have made the poetry and music and remembered the old stories and told them in human voices. All praise to the young people who have listened and will tell the tales again and add their own. And the senior people, the older ones, with us still and those gone on, I see them in my mind, carry them in my heart, and I thank them all, and will sing their names as a song, in pledge of my allegiance.



# The Photograph

**M**Y MOTHER and her people and my father and his people had stayed up all night at Grandma and Granddad Collier's house in 1944, arguing over where I was going to live while my father was gone to war. My mother whom I hadn't seen in a year and her sisters Arnetta and Ruth and some boyfriend of Ruth's had tried to take me away to Indianapolis for the duration but my father who was home on furlough and Grandma and Granddad and Aunt Evelyn and her husband L.C. had shouted them down until finally about four o'clock in the morning my mother and her sisters and the man with them all left shrieking and crying. I was only five and in bed but wide awake, of course, listening through the walls to all that was said. I felt guilty because I knew I wanted to stay at Grandma's instead of going with my mother. I loved my mother but she was strange and Grandma's house had been my home as long as I could remember and I didn't want to go away with anyone. Even though I wanted to stay at Grandma's she said things about my mother that I dreaded to hear her say. I thought at first that the man with them was my mother's boyfriend instead of Aunt Ruth's. Grandma had been telling me that my mother ran around with nasty men and that was why I didn't see her very often, but I knew that wasn't true. She said that my mother wasn't fit to be my mother anymore. I knew that wasn't true either. I was only five but I knew how to

## THE PHOTOGRAPH

hear that kind of grownup talk without feeling anything about it one way or another. Through the walls I heard my mother crying and pleading and Aunt Ruth cussing and then Grandma and my father shouting. Then I heard some dishes smash on the floor and several doors slam including the doors of the car my mother and the people with her had come in.

The next day we took my father to the bus station in town so he could get back to his Army unit that was headed overseas. He hugged me goodbye in front of the bus station and Aunt Jenny took me by the hand and led me through the throngs of people down Main Street to the Kentucky Theater and came inside to sit with me for a few minutes, according to our custom. I felt strange from staying awake all night the night before but I was excited as always to be going to the show. I was only five but I was well able to sit in the movies by myself. Ever since my mom had moved to Indianapolis and my dad had been in the Army, Jenny had been taking me to the movies on Saturdays. She would come inside and sit with me until I was settled. Then she would pat me on the hand and steal out of the theater to shop in the stores while I watched the show.

I hardly noticed when she patted my hand this time for I was quickly lost in the newsreel images of war on the movie screen, falling bombs and burning buildings and battleships firing their huge guns as the Marines landed on the beachhead. When someone patted my arm again and whispered my name I thought it was Jenny come back to tell me something. It was too dark to see him at first but then I felt his presence, felt the mystery of my father kneeling beside me like a shadow in the aisle, his actual hand upon my actual arm. Then in the light from the screen I saw my father's sad face looking at me. Wilgus, he whispered, come outside a minute, I'll bring you right back.

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We had already said goodbye yet there he was again. How could that be? Wordlessly I walked with my father up the aisle to the lobby and then to the street outside where the afternoon light was so bright I had to close my eyes. I tried to follow him through the crowd but I kept stumbling until he lifted me to his shoulders and carried me high above the throng. All the way up Main Street, past clothing stores and hardware stores and jewelry stores and drugstores, past the courthouse where two old men on the top step preached simultaneously to the crush of people below, my father carried me. Then suddenly he set me on the ground and by the hand led me through a door into a photo store where a little man I'd never seen before quickly sat me on a stool behind a curtain. With his small hands he pointed my face straight ahead. Then he stepped back and opened the curtain and then a light flashed before my eyes, so bright I was blinded again.

Then my father led me outside again, and again swung me onto his shoulders and off we went down the street again, passing rows of buses whose motors were running as soldiers lined up at their doors. Past the post office and the courthouse and the stores, through the crowd we ran the length of Main Street back to the Kentucky Theater where my father stood me on my feet again and led me by the hand down the dark aisle to the same seat I had occupied before. You be a good boy, he whispered. He pressed his cheek to the top of my head and touched my face with his hand. Then he was gone. I sat there blind a long time but gradually my eyes adjusted and several years went by. When my father died in the Veterans Hospital in 1951 and the hospital sent his belongings home in a box, I found the picture the little man took of me that day, and pictures of my mother as well.



# Karo

**G**RANDMA THOUGHT our old dog Karo had gone mad. Karo was real old and she frothed around her mouth some but I knew she wasn't mad. I tried to get in on the talk about Karo but nobody listened to me. Grandma told Uncle Delmer they might have to shoot Karo. I thought it was something they'd talk about some more and I went to the front yard to play. But then I heard a gunshot and I ran back and there was Karo flopping on the ground by the coal pile, shrieking and crying and trying to pull herself along with her front legs. Delmer had shot Karo in the hindquarters with his .38 pistol. I wasn't but nine but I knew that if he had to kill her he ought to of tied her to a post and took a steady aim at her head with a .22 rifle like you would a hog. Delmer had stood on the back porch steps and tried to kill Karo with a pistol from way across the yard, and her running. Soon as I come around the house there was another shot, and then another one. The bullets hit Karo in the belly and in the neck and they still didn't kill her. She screamed and cried and tried to crawl away. Then Grandma came running out of the house with the .22, cussing Delmer all to pieces. She was going to get up close and put poor Karo out of her misery. But then Delmer shot again and this time he hit Karo in the head and she quit screaming. Delmer's last shot almost hit Grandma. She stopped in her tracks and stared at Karo on the

## KARO

ground. Then she walked over to Delmer and took his pistol away from him. She said, "You leave my house." Delmer looked like he didn't know who Grandma was. But he obeyed her. When he went out of sight behind the house I ran over to where Karo was laying. Her body was tore all to pieces.

"Get the shovel, Wilgus. Get the pick."

I watched Grandma open the corn crib in the barn and take out a feed sack. While I went to get the tools, Grandma wrapped Karo up in the burlap. About that time Aunt Evelyn came out of the house and walked over to where we stood. Grandma carried Karo in her arms and Evelyn helped me carry the pick and shovel and we headed out across the field.

We dug Karo's grave under the bamgilly tree in the field behind the barn. Grandma did most of the work. She fixed the burlap bag tighter around Karo, then laid her in the grave. I helped shovel the dirt back in the hole. When the work was finished, Grandma picked up a flat limestone rock and put it on the grave. Then she picked up the shovel and started walking back to the house. Aunt Evelyn walked behind Grandma, carrying the pick. I stayed at the grave awhile, glad to be alone with my dog.

# Tommy Cassinelli

**T**OMMY CASSINELLI was a bully at school and he pushed me around some but somehow I was never afraid of him. I could take whatever push or shove or knock-down there might be. I was sorry when he made some of the smaller boys cry and run away. But still, in a strange way, Tommy felt like kinfolks to me. We lived in the same coal camp and our fathers loaded coal together in the mine, and they were both union guys. Sometimes Tommy's mother would help my mother who was tired much of the time and always kind of sad.

After school we boys would play around the pile of railroad ties next to the tracks in front of the commissary. Sometimes we played on the tracks, putting nails or pennies on the rails for the train to flatten. Sometimes we would play a game called Hobo where we would jump onto a slow-moving train and ride it as it picked up speed. This was still in the steam engine days when the train roared and sent up billows of smoke and ashes and swirling coal dust so thick you had to keep your eyes closed half the time. We clung like monkeys to the sides of the gons, sometimes hanging on to the steel stepping bars with one hand and waving to each other with the other. The cowards would jump off soon after they got on but others of us would stay on as the train went faster, and then jump off one by one when our courage ran out until finally only Tommy Cassinelli was still riding.

## TOMMY CASSINELLI

I wasn't any good at fighting or throwing rocks or running races, games that required agility. I was not an agile kid. But I could maintain, hold on, I could take it, tenacity was my secret power. Several times I was the last boy on the train with Tommy. One time we jumped on the same coal gon, he at the forward end and I at the back. The wind blew dust in our eyes so we could barely see and the roar of the wheels, steel on steel, was so loud it overwhelmed all other sounds. I waved at Tommy but he was looking ahead and didn't see me. I wanted him to know that it was me on the coal gon with him. I held onto the steel bar with one hand and waved like crazy, whirling my arm around and around until finally he did notice me and waved back. We looked at each other through half-closed eyes as the blurred world beside the tracks rushed by faster and faster. I knew I would jump before Tommy but something in me made me want to push him past his own limit, make him a better hobo and in the process make myself a better hobo too. Finally I let go of my bar and flew outwards and down into the weeds, then walked the mile or two on the railroad tracks back home.

In school Tommy still shoved me around a little but I could tell that now he recognized that there was a limit where I was concerned. I think we would have become real friends if there'd been more time. One day in November two men came to the school and spoke to Miss Turner and Miss Turner told Tommy to go with the men and he did and I never saw him again. His father's legs had been cut off in a mine accident that afternoon and during the night he died.

The next day the Cassinellis' camp house was empty. We never did learn where they moved to, or why they left so suddenly. It was a strange feeling. Another family soon moved into their house but they didn't stay long. That winter the mine laid off half the workers and by spring, half the houses in the camp were empty.

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Sometime in the early sixties the company tore the coal camp down, but I still go out to the site from time to time. The buildings are gone, but the places, the spaces where they stood, are still there, grown up in saplings, slowly being covered by the kudzu vines.