MY LIFE by Dale Wilson

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SUTHERLAND

How I Came To Be…

I was conceived when my mother was 15 falling prey to the charms of a mountain boy of little education, a boastful character and the instinct to survive thru dominating others at his very core. All this was introduced to her at a time when she probably felt incompetent, and struggling to make sense of life as a teenager. It was 1950, the war had not been silent for long but prosperity had even seeped into the mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina as the indigenous folk began to reap some benefits of an economic recovery they hadn’t planned upon. My biological father at 18 had a fast car, nice clothes and drew a decent salary bootlegging for his uncle. Times were good down Thunder Road.

The earliest memories or any cognizance I have is of the interior of a late 40’s Chevrolet, making mud pies in the driveway and letting them bake on the side porch stoop, my dog Brownie and mom (Grace Wilson) holding me on her lap and feeding me grapefruit. The days were sunny, protected and never ending.

My birth was the result of an unexpected pregnancy in a time when unwed mothers were chastised and even swept under the carpet of institutions who cared for these “situations” but not so in my case. The biological father was run off at gunpoint by my grandfather, a suitable marriage was arranged to another beau of my mothers and I was born, Jesse Dale Hodges, Jr. on July 20, 1951. Harry S Truman was still President. The buck did stop there!

Life in rural Sutherland, North Carolina in the early 50’s was the essence of bucolic America. We were mostly ignored by county, state and federal government, thank God! So long as taxes were paid we were free to subsist as best we could, hunt for small game, plant tobacco and continue to marry our cousins when it seemed a good fit. After all, being landlocked both culturally and geographically had its advantages.. but I digress.

At the age of 7 I began my formal education at Mabel Elementary School in Zionville, NC. What is striking to me is that I traveled by bus thru three counties and two states to arrive at Mrs. Mast’s first grade class. There we learned organization, respect for our teachers and how to read the King’s English thru snippets of the daily lives of Dick and Jane with a healthy dose of Spot. Each day commenced with a school bus ride under the tutelage of one Willy Laing, who was charged with bringing us safely from our homes to school and back again. Willy began the pick ups in the heart of Potter Town (Meat Camp) where decent men did not tread nor tarry due to the general lawlessness of the area. Here people simply settled their grievances with a gun, with no remorse for the outcome and little sympathy for the loser. So well I remember sitting on the bus between two children, one whose father had slain the other child’s father in a contest over some squabble probably to do with a rhetorical insult or less. Mountain men did not insult each other.. did not wrong each other in a cavalier way without suffering certain consequences. The Potters, the Ellison’s, the Snyder’s, the Shelton’s ..names of children I remember well and especially the eyes they cast when their kin were killed by the relatives of the student they shared a bus seat with. Today we would find this “insensitive” at best.. in those days it was simply reality.